

IDRC CRDI

From Field Results to Organizational Improvement

Learning From Work in International
Development

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Canadian Partnerships Research Reports

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Preface

The political and economic environment in which civil society organizations engaged in international cooperation and development work has changed radically in recent years.

There is growing pressure for them to do more with less, under declining official development assistance overall. There is also mounting pressure for them to re-define their niches in the international development community, given the emergence or re-emergence of other actors: global South diaspora in higher income countries; direct investments in the global South by corporations based in the global North and in emerging-economy countries; private-sector funded foundations; and more sophisticated civil society organizations in the global South.

Increasingly, CSOs working internationally do not compete only one with another for dedicated public funding envelopes but these envelopes are now opened for other types of organizations to compete for those funds. CSOs are learning to partner or at least collaborate with new actors.

CSOs are under pressure to become more efficient at what they do and this implies greater attention to professionalising their staff and recruiting individuals with new skills. It also requires them to become better at capturing, sharing and using tacit and experiential knowledge stemming from their work and that of their partners in the global South, in order to improve themselves and be more effective at supporting positive social change for development.

Eric Smith`s research is certainly among the first to survey and examine the extent to which a culture of learning exists amidst the Canadian civil society community engaged in international cooperation and development (CCSOs): what are the learning issues which they have been addressing in recent years, how they have been doing so, and what are the success factors and some promising practices experienced so far by a few select organizations which may inspire others in Canada and abroad to better learn in order to better perform.

We find some of Eric`s findings particularly worthy of attention :

It may come as a surprise to some, in the face of constraints faced by CCSOs, that a majority of those who participated in the survey declared that they do possess a clear learning strategy, while others who do not possess one still have some of its elements.

As hypothesized, the size of an organization is a major determinant in its selection of particular approaches to learn from their work; some approaches seem definitely more suited to the needs and capacities of larger than to those of smaller CSOs. Activities which CCSOs use to share knowledge within and outside their organization are also conditioned by their size. The majority face significant challenges, whose incidence also varies according to CSO size. All of this to say that funding agencies should exert discretion when applying monitoring and evaluation requirements to CSO recipients, large and small.

Given resource constraints faced by smaller CCSOs, Canadian provincial and regional councils were found to support a wide range of aspects of organizational learning among their membership, convene diverse activities in order to do so. However, a major concern which they have is how to evaluate the impact of knowledge networks which they do or could animate. There may be an opportunity here for communities of practice mentioned in this paper to share their monitoring and evaluation methods with councils. Two council-led path-breaking practices would deserve support to inspire others: the Ontario Council for International Cooperation's own Focus in Development series on good practices among their membership, and the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation's four university-CCSO networks at the sub-provincial level, to help the Council reach out to their members outside of the Metro Vancouver area.

All case studies point to what seem to be three ingredients essential to successful learning strategies for CCSOs: (1) secure senior management and support staff for changes to be made in how the organization defines itself, how it structures itself and functions, and what it delivers, how and why; (2) identify the knowledge needs of the organization's staff itself, those of its partners, donors and other critical stakeholders, as well as potential synergies and streamlining to reduce effort in

meeting those various needs ; and (3) develop purposeful processes to collect data, transform data into knowledge and use this for positive change. At the end of the day, it is all about which knowledge you need and how to manage it so that you can make better decisions for the organization. These three ingredients can be used as valuable criteria by funders, when assessing proposals from organizations who seek support for activities aimed at better managing their knowledge in order to improve themselves.

If learning cultures, if not networks, are to be fostered, given the new environment depicted at the beginning of this preface, there needs to be greater support for face-to-face exchanges, not less. This may seem a paradox to some, given the evermore sophisticated virtual environment in which we communicate, but the case studies and interviews discussed in this paper do underscore that even in 2013 and even among a new generation of practitioners, face-to-face exchanges remain “an essential element of an organization’s learning strategy”. Documenting becomes a by-product of such interaction, essential for memory, but is not what will engage individuals in a learning dynamic. In the case studies, CCSOs such as Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST) and Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), with dispersed personnel and high inter connectivity thanks to virtual platforms, do continue to value face-to-face meetings as critical to their learning strategy , while communities of practice value these for trust and empathy building between individuals and each other’s organizations, for focused interaction and for effective use of their time. It has been Canadian Partnerships` experience in two learning forums in Western and in Eastern Canada over the last two years that in this vast country organizations long to learn from one another, for which they consider face-to-face dialogue as a worthy cost.

To make face-to-face encounters financially acceptable, there is a need for CCSOs to bring the learning activities from the margins of their accountability to the center of it. CCSOs and their donors must do away with the perception and practice of considering learning activities as an administrative cost. Learning from field results should have as a central objective to make the organization better at delivering such results in the future, by allocating time and resources to reflecting on, and

documenting, its own practice and that of others. This is a cost intrinsic to the development activity itself and it should be accounted for as such.

This is the third of a series of three research papers produced by IDRC's Special Initiatives Division's research awardees in 2011-2013, which have explored real practices among the Canadian community of academics and civil society practitioners linked to the three goals of SID's Canadian Partnerships Program for the period 2010-2015: (a) foster research collaboration between universities and CSOs; (b) support research that influences practice and policy; and (c) support Canadian organizations engaged in international development research and action to become better at learning from their experience. Two previous papers addressed the first and second objectives, with the third objective being covered by this paper.

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Acronyms

BCCIC	British Columbia Council for International Cooperation
ACGC	Alberta Council for Global Cooperation
ACIC	Atlantic Council for International Cooperation
AQOCI	Associations québécoise des Organismes de Coopération internationale
CCIC	Canadian Council for International Cooperation
CESO	Canadian Executive Service Organization
CoP	Community of practice
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CCSO	Canadian Civil Society Organization
EWB	Engineers without Borders
ICN	Inter-Council Network
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
K4D	Knowledge For Development
KM	Knowledge Management
LFA	Logical Framework Approach
LO	Learning Organization
MCIC	Manitoba Council for International Cooperation
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCIC	Ontario Council for International Cooperation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OK	Organizational Knowledge
OM	Outcome Mapping
OL	Organizational Learning

RBM	Results Based Management
SCI	Sustainable Cities International
SCIC	Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation

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Executive Summary

There is a growing interest in organizational learning and improvement in the not-for-profit sector of sustainable development. This field aims to understand how organizational processes and aims can be improved or strengthened for better development results. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) do not simply provide service delivery and project support to their partners in the developing world. They are institutions with corporate objectives and strategies that must be supported by headquarters-level planning and strategies. The aim of this study is to understand how Canadian Civil Society Organizations (CCSOs) are working to support field activities by improving their knowledge capture, organizational learning, and decision-making processes. Organizational learning is explored through CCSO's recent experiences with learning initiatives, how they capture knowledge from field work and apply lessons to their strategies and directions, the challenges and opportunities they face, and the extent to which they share these lessons with others in the wider development community.

A literature review situates the study in the context of organizational learning in the development sector. This found that most of the literature focuses on donor agencies and large international NGOs. There was little on smaller NGOs/CSOs, and even less in the Canadian context. It provided a conceptual framework by which to situate four types of learning initiatives: conceptual (related to organization visions, missions, and strategies); content-based (data that is captured from field work); applied (systems that support data capture and analysis); and, process-based (internal operations and structures that facilitate knowledge flow and decision-making). For CCSOs in development, these initiatives are rooted in practice, that is, the field work that they carry out. This might be research, interventions, evaluations, volunteer placements, or other forms of support to partners.

Two surveys provide an overview of how Canadian civil society organizations (CCSOs) engage with learning from their field work and activities. One survey targeted CCSOs that produce research from their field work. A second survey targeted connective organizations such as coalitions, councils, and networks to provide an overview of how these organizations support their memberships in their learning and knowledge activities. The aims of these surveys were to assess the extent of learning strategies, the specific organizational aspects of learning which CCSOs target, the means and activities that they use to incorporate learning into their work, and the challenges they face when doing so.

These surveys found that most responding CCSOs participate in many formal learning activities and have clear learning strategies to guide them when learning from their work and practices. Networks respond to, and support, the learning strategies of their members by providing networking opportunities, workshops, webinars, and other activities to convene CCSOs. They provide context analyses to the Canadian civil society sector by mapping and researching emerging trends which can support the overall learning strategies of CCSOs. In general, CCSO learning strategies support many facets of their organization through internal and external activities. Most, but not all, CCSOs share their lessons with others in the wider development community. However, they prefer to disseminate these lessons through face-to-face activities rather than in published reports and briefs. Small, medium, and large organizations

all face distinct exogenous and endogenous challenges in their learning initiatives that constrain their actions, such as a dearth of resources and competing donor requirements and partner needs.

Four case studies examine the purposes and challenges of recent CCSO learning initiatives. These successful initiatives have informed monitoring and evaluation, systems for knowledge capture, organizational processes, and business models and strategies. Inspiring practices such as these illustrate that CCSOs are deeply engaged in learning from the work that they do. An analysis of the cases illustrates that CCSOs choose strategies that secure senior management and staff support; that balance internal needs with external demands; that design purposeful data collection systems; that apply knowledge to decision-making; and, that maximize the use of internal and network capacity. CCSOs should attempt to bring learning to the centre of their work, rather than leaving it at the margins. This can be difficult, as learning activities are often unfunded, but they provide the opportunity to reflect on work processes, projects, and emerging issues. Moments for shared reflection also provide time to transfer experiential knowledge through socialization. It is strongly recommended that CCSOs record their lessons not only about their impacts but also about processes that effectively support field work, and share these within their networks and through regional councils.

In order to continue supporting the work of their member organizations, regional councils could carefully consider the needs of members and their audience, be they newly founded, established, or large organizations. They could consider whether or not they provide a range of activities that keep their memberships engaged and actively sharing with one another. Donors should keep in mind that they are the exogenous factor that often provides critical motivation for CCSO learning. As such they have a responsibility to ensure that changes in policy and procedure help CCSOs improve the work they do. This entails providing time for reflection and learning after project lifecycles conclude as well as flexibility in monitoring and evaluation that reflects the needs and capacity of recipients and their partners in the developing world.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Once the domain of private businesses and those who study them, there is a growing interest in organizational learning and improvement in the not-for-profit sector of sustainable development. This field aims to understand how organizational processes and aims can be improved or strengthened for better development results. Heretofore, most studies have examined Official Development Agencies and international non-government organizations. The aim of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature on organizational learning relevant to the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) that work in international development and cooperation. As we move towards the post-2015 era and beyond the Millennium Development Goals there will be new roles for CSOs to play. This review aims to speak to how Canadian CSOs (CCSOs) are learning and improving the work they do by providing a brief history of learning and knowledge in international development and cooperation, a brief theoretical overview of the predominant approaches to knowledge and learning, a review of practices CCSOs use to learn from their research and interventions, and also note the broader challenges to learning and knowledge in the development context.

1.1 Civil Society Organizations and the Role of Research in Organizational Improvement

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can be broadly defined as private and voluntary non-government and not-for-profit organizations that operate with mandates that include service delivery, advocacy, community building, and guarding common values. The World Bank's comprehensive definition of civil society states that it "refers to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for profit organisations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members of others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide array of organisations: community groups, non-government organisations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and foundations" (World Bank 2010). Court et al. (2006) take a different approach by defining CSOs by what they are not: "any organization that works in the arena between the household, the private sector, and the state, to negotiate matters of public concern." Just as types of organizations that represent civil society are diverse, so are their roles. As agents of change in international development and cooperation the OECD's *Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness* (2009) identifies seven areas in which CSO have roles: mobilization of grassroots communities; monitoring and accountability of government and donors; research and policy; service delivery; networking; aid delivery; and education.

Often these roles are not discrete activities, but merged with other aspects of their organizational operations and directions. As these definitions show, CSOs have broad roles in the public sphere. For those CSOs with an interest in international development and cooperation these roles may be broader still, given the array of stakeholders involved; Northern and Southern donors, partners, and beneficiaries of

CSOs often share responsibilities in field work to ease individual organizational burdens. As the focus of this research is on how Canadian CSOs (CCSOs) learn from their field work in international development and cooperation, it will examine headquarters-level knowledge and learning strategies undertaken by CSOs to help inform their organizational directions and operations, including field activities.

Travers' study (2011) undertaken for the Canadian Partnerships Program of the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC) found that the majority of CCSOs conduct research primarily using their own staff and interns. There are advantages to this approach, including being able to set the research agenda to ensure the credibility and quality of research, to capitalize on already established relationships CCSOs have with their stakeholders, to reformulate research questions as necessary or appropriate, and to directly strengthen the capacity of their stakeholders. This research is used to directly or indirectly influence policy and practice to improve the lives of their stakeholders. However, the role of research for CCSOs, either in isolation or in collaboration, has deepened in recent years (see also Gall, Millot & Claudia Neubauer, 2009; and Chernikova, 2010). Gall et al. (2009), note that CSOs often view research narrowly through its impact on policy action and as an instrumental tool for advocacy rather than in its broader contribution to solutions or to CSOs' own learning. They go on to note that some CSOs would "directly benefit from developing a culture of research, from learning to value and to capitalize their knowledge. They could develop a culture of reflexivity, learn to question more regularly their own practices and organisation." (Gall et al., 2009: 100). Research can inform not only advocacy but also offer lessons for improving organizational strategy, directions and operations; in short, research can play a role in organizational learning.

The following section documents how research can contribute to organizational improvement by providing a brief history of learning and knowledge in international development and cooperation.

1.2 Organizational Learning in Development: Calls for Action

"The idea of a learning organization is like a myth: a collection of ideas, woven into a story that helps us make sense of experience and forms one of many ideals to which to aspire. The story is compelling and useful in many situations, so it is a story that is often told (although with many variations)." (Roper et al. 2003; 78-79)

James Wolfensohn's 1996 address as incoming president to the World Bank is often said to have set into motion the use of the knowledge and learning approach, when he announced that the Bank would become a "knowledge bank" (Wolfensohn, 1996). This shift was prompted by increasing criticism of the World Bank for its inefficient aid and excessive expenditure. In response to these criticisms, the World Bank aimed to increase accountability and efficiency while positioning itself at the nexus of a knowledge network that would capture thought and expertise to be shared with its clients and partners through the use of information technology advances. This initiative was foundational to the current knowledge-based aid paradigm which aims to improve Knowledge Management (KM) and Organizational Learning (OL)

within organizations, to create North-South partnerships to share knowledge, and to build capacities to overcome the 'digital divide' (Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007; Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Ramalingam, 2005)

Since Wolfensohn's inaugural address Knowledge for Development (K4D), 'knowledge for aid,' KM and OL have become familiar terms in the development sector. Another landmark for knowledge and learning was the Institute of Development Studies' *Development and the Learning Organisation* (2003). This collection of essays examined how private-sector and for-profit experiences of learning had been absorbed by development practitioners, and how they had been put into practice within the development context. It was also inspired by the recognition that the experiences of the development sector could contribute to broader theoretical literature on OL. It examines 5 themes of learning: (i) broader challenges to OL including power, culture and gender; (ii) institutional partnerships and collaborations for learning; (iii) the levels of learning within an organization; (iv) learning from humanitarian action; and (v) techniques (tools and methods) for learning. The key conclusions from the collection are that development organizations ought to draw both from their experiences and from theory to ensure that practitioners function democratically and effectively; that development organizations must allow the poor and marginalized to draw from the richness of their philosophical, religious, and cultural views to define the development model; and that, as key intermediaries, CSOs and NGOs have feet in more than one world and are well-poised to bring non-Western understandings of development, management and practices into the mainstream.

The necessity of organizational learning and knowledge sharing by CSOs as knowledge brokers was more recently officially recognized by the Open Forum for Development Effectiveness. The *Siem Reap Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness* (2011) was developed through open consultations with thousands of civil society organizations over two CSO Global Assemblies. A major outcome of the Assemblies were the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness. The seventh principle clearly recognizes the importance of organizational learning, knowledge management and mutual learning and reads "CSOs are effective as development actors when they enhance the ways they learn from their experience, from other CSOs and development actors, integrating evidence from development practice and results, including the knowledge and wisdom of local and indigenous communities, strengthening innovation and their vision for the future they would like to see." Principle 7 calls on CSOs to be learning organizations and to become 'knowledge brokers' by creating, sharing, and implementing knowledge as a key component of their strategies in areas of collaboration, capacity strengthening, and evaluation.

1.3 Theories of Organizational Learning

While there are a plethora of definitions for KM and OL, this paper will follow Krohwinkel-Karlsson's (2007) definitions of four key concepts in the study of knowledge and learning within development. Krohwinkel-Karlsson's study reviewed the different approaches use for knowledge and learning and identified four main categories into which activities and initiatives were structures. These are 'knowledge management', 'organizational knowledge', 'the learning organization', and 'organizational learning'. A fifth concept, a 'practice-based' approach (Ferguson et al., 2008) can be used to ground these within CSO field activities,

research and interventions. While these are related concepts, each understands the value and use of knowledge differently. Nor are they necessarily applied independently of one another, but can be mutually supportive. They might also be understood as different levels of learning that can all feed into strategy, planning, or operations. The implications of these differences for approaches to learning are outlined below:

Knowledge management (KM) is an approach that emphasizes the collection, codification, and distribution of knowledge. It can be thought of as the processes that convert raw information “into relevant knowledge and using this to achieve [organizational] aims” (Hovland: 10). It is closely related to the ‘first generation’ of KM, which focussed on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) interventions to manage and codify the large volume of organizational data that was threatening to overwhelm many organizations in the early 1990s. Early attempts to use ICT threatened to cause information overload on a scale that made knowledge and learning problems even worse. A further concern with KM strategies is that they often do not or are unable to distinguish what data is valuable to an organization, nor does the indiscriminate collection and codification of data allow organizations to apply what they know or innovate. To address these concerns a ‘second generation’ of KM strategies, including document management systems, intranets, and extranets that include meta-data (data about data) have helped render these corporate memories more accessible and useable (Britton, 2005). Finally, a third generation with significantly enhanced capacities has allowed for greater connectivity between different aspects of organizations and with the outside world.

Organizational knowledge (OK) is an approach to knowledge and learning that acknowledges the differences between tacit and explicit knowledge and provides ways and means of operationalizing implicit knowledge. While explicit knowledge “can be articulated or documented with relative ease, tacit knowledge is based on personal experience and skills... [it] can only be transferred through socialization processes, such as jointly performed tasks, face to face discussions etc. “ (Krohwinkel-Karlsson 2007, 11). KM strategies that capture and codify data are notoriously bad at capturing the context of the experiential knowledge that is so often crucial in international development and cooperation. The transfer of tacit knowledge requires interpretation and socialization to learn from collective experiences rather than the ‘technological fix’ provided by KM.

The Learning Organization (LO) developed out of the corporate sector and the work of Peter Senge. A learning organization is one “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge 1990; quoted in Krohwinkel-Karlsson 2007, 10). The team is the key learning unit in organizations while ‘learning leaders’ build shared vision and openness to strategic changes. A later development is Wenger’s (2002) study of communities of practice (CoPs) within the corporate environment. The role of CoPs in international development and cooperation will be examined below.

Organizational learning (OL) is the theoretical analysis of learning processes within organizations. It emphasizes the processes, procedures and routines that an organization uses to respond to and anticipate external stimuli. This approach is systemic and focusses on the structures that impede or facilitate

organizational decision-making and examines connections within organizational systems rather than individual aspects of organizations. As developed by Argyris (1992) OL theory distinguishes between single- and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning's objective is to render organizational activity more efficient, while double-loop learning aims to make an organization open to strategic changes by encouraging organizational staff/members to think critically and creatively about the assumptions and values that underlie their work to improve the organization's strategy and operations.

A fifth model, a **practice-based approach**, which explicitly addresses the role of CSOs in research, is developed by Ferguson, et al. in *Management of Knowledge for development: meta-review and scoping study* (2008). It aims to ground previous theories of learning and knowledge in the understanding that "the individual's practices, situated at a community level, form the central pivot of knowledge creation" (Ferguson et al., 2008: 10). Connections between practices and contexts allow knowledge flows to occur and stimulates situated learning, the process by which knowledge is co-constructed and embedded within practices. According to Ferguson et al, knowledge and learning activities/practices should reflect the goals of creating and facilitating knowledge flows within and between social networks to achieve mutual learning for more effective development and cooperation. A practical example of this is *Fight Eviction: Tribal Land Rights and Research in Action* (Buckles and Khedkar, 2013) which used the SAS2 model of participatory action research. This approach to social change in the development context emphasized that research must be done 'with' people, not 'on' or 'for' them, if it is to effectively address the needs of people and go beyond a merely transitory intervention without lasting influence.

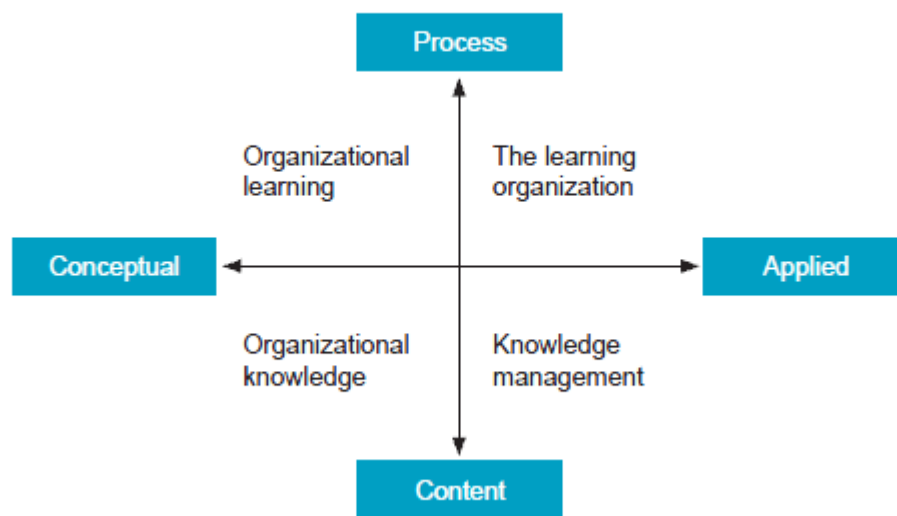


Figure 1: Source: Krohwinkel-Karlsson (2007), *Knowledge and Learning in Aid Organizations*: 9, modified from Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2003).

1.4 Practices and Methods of Fostering Learning and Knowledge

This review will not focus on the particular tools of learning and knowledge, as several reviews have already addressed these specifically (see Britton 2005). Moreover the challenges and complexities inherent to learning can be oversimplified or lost by the strict application of tools or rules. Nor are all tools appropriate to all organizations (Britton, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2008). In learning there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach due to different organizational capacities, operations, and needs. It is more effective to approach learning holistically in a manner that links knowledge and learning strategies to organizational direction and decision-making processes rather than exploring “only components, tools, or methods” (Ferguson et al.;2008, 19). A pitfall of narrow approaches is that they are likely to embed learning only in niches rather than in the organization as a whole, impeding improvements to overall directions and operations.

Given the aforementioned context, this review will focus on broader methods used to facilitate and foster learning and knowledge within organizations that borrow from KM, OK, OL, and LO theory. It will focus on the Canadian context of such approaches and tools to best capture some of the current practices of CCSOs. Challenges and opportunities related to these practices and methods will be further addressed in Chapter 1, Section 5. It should also be stressed that ‘organizational learning’ or a ‘learning organization’ are nearly always dependent on successful KM tools and practices. This is doubly so when conducting field research or interventions when the knowledge gained must be transferred from the ground to the organization to inform future work.

1.4.1 Organizational culture has long been recognized as the most important factor in creating learning- and knowledge-oriented environments within organizations and all major reviews make note of this. Britton (2005) notes that the challenges which CSOs face, including the Logical Framework Approach to planning and constant pressure to generate results, can result in an ‘adrenaline culture’ where outputs are the major, or only, measure of success in the field. As a result of these pressures, the incentives for learning and change are lost (see also Ferguson et al., 2008). There may also be a fear of repercussions if negative or critical outcomes were to emerge from learning. Moreover, Krohwinkel-Karlsson remark that there is a powerful emotional incentive to (consciously or unconsciously) suppress failure in development, as failures are associated with failing to save or make a positive impact on human lives.

Britton (2005) examines how the motive, opportunity and means for learning can be embedded within an organization so that it is not a ‘luxury’ that is contrasted to ‘real’ work. This means that management must value learning (providing the motive), have learning as a discrete objective within expected project outcomes (providing the opportunity), and have appropriate tools to capture knowledge (providing the means). These can be distinguished into two broader categories; the tools/practices for learning and the broader organizational culture and its particular approach to learning, be it KM, OK, OL, LO, or practice-based. A crucial aspect of organizational culture not explored by Britton is value placed on sharing information in a timely manner with those other than staff – volunteers, partners, and other stakeholders. These non-staff interested parties value seeing that their own contributions are being used within organizations, and that they have access to information that can inform their own project planning and organizations.

Formal tools and practices that encourage learning include weekly meetings, learning forums, annual or semi-annual retreats, the sharing of staff and travel reports, document retrieval systems, and intranets. There are also more informal practices, such as coffee breaks and learning lunches, which are not mandatory but provide the opportunity to share knowledge informally. While the tools and practices that support learning may be easier to apply than management practices, the management implications of a learning strategy should not be dismissed. If knowledge “is acknowledged as a key component of development work, and learning is so important, this would imply that the organization’s management needs to be structured in such a manner to optimize the flow, the sharing and the development of knowledge” (Ferguson et al, 2008: 19). An organization’s ability to document knowledge may be achieved through KM tools, but to harness this knowledge for future learning and innovation requires a culture and process that can achieve organizational change. This requires a clear organizational strategy that incorporates approaches to learning that are appropriate for that organization. As Ferguson et al. (2008; 20) note:

“This involves identifying the unique knowledge assets of the organization, exploring the key organizational processes, and identifying how this knowledge can be streamlined in support of these processes, towards optimal achievement of organizational and, in this case, development goals.”

An organization that has made strides in this direction is Engineers Without Borders. EWB’s organizational culture appreciates that failure occurs and is a part of any organization; 100% success is never achievable. Their approach recognizes that, while failure is a tragedy, it is worse when we fail to learn from our mistakes to improve future work. Their iterative approach to change and learning provides the motive, opportunity, and means for their organization, as well as others, to learn from the challenges they have encountered in their field work. Alongside their *Failure Reports* (2008-2011) is an associated side project, Admitting Failure, a virtual open space for organizations to discuss their failed research and interventions to maximize learning and innovation to address complex development problems.

1.4.2 Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have evolved greatly since their introduction as tools for knowledge management. The first generation of KM stressed ICTs as tools that increased the ease of documentation within an organization. They were used to collect and codify knowledge and included document-management systems, databases, organizational yellow pages. This was a far cry from organizational learning, but did improve corporate ‘memory.’ The first generation of ICTs for KM drove ‘single-loop learning’ to resolve inefficiencies, but could easily lead to information overload due to the volume of data created without efficient means of using it. These types of KM strategies, while important, cannot foster the critical and reflective attitude of Organizational Learning (OL) strategies such as ‘double-loop learning,’ nor are they likely to capture the contextual embeddedness of knowledge so critical to learning from field results of research and interventions (Ferguson et al, 2010).

The second generation of ICT strategies were document-management systems, intranets, and extranets. These include meta-data (data about data) to render corporate memories more accessible and they use digital methods to create online learning resources. Finally, a third generation has harnessed the capabilities of the Internet to create online platforms for communication. These are ‘virtual platforms’

that facilitate knowledge sharing, learning, and collaboration at a distance. The aim of third-generation ICT interventions for learning and knowledge is to use online, collective learning to share and enhance real-life/offline activities. They may also connect local, regional, and international constituencies to create larger communities that are more inclusive and mitigate issues of power/knowledge. Virtual platforms entail their own unique challenges which will be discussed further below in **Communities of Practice (CoPs)**.

A notable example of a virtual platform is the **Entrepreneur's Toolkit**, developed by the SEED Initiative. The toolkit offers online resources and sharing of case studies and up-to-date information of local actors, formal or informal groups based in rural or urban areas, to support small-scale initiatives that incorporate social and environmental benefits into their business models (Creech, 2012).

1.4.3 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tools typically ensure that research and interventions undertaken by organizations are financially accountable to both donors and beneficiaries. Typically, donors require a Results Based Management (RBM) approach consistent with the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) for project planning. While RBM/LFA methods offer consistent guidelines to organizations, they have been criticized for being donor impositions that do not provide accountability to beneficiaries, for requiring high levels of investment, training and time, for not taking into account cultural contexts, and for being unwieldy (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005). Furthermore, they often make it difficult for CSOs to balance the goal of learning from past work to improve directions and operations with the goal of accounting to donors and beneficiaries. It is largely agreed that RBM approaches are also more easily put into practice by donors and large CSOs that have greater capacity and resources. Smaller CSOs, such as grass-roots or community-based organizations with less experience and capacity, may experience frustration when applying an RBM/LFA approach. It has also been argued that RBM/LFA approaches may not account for less tangible results, such as gender equality, that cannot be measured through linear models (see Christie, 2008).

These limitations have prompted a trend towards RBM+ tools that provide financial accountability but also cater better to the learning and planning needs of the CSOs and their partners. To support learning from research and interventions these learning-oriented evaluation tools combine RBM with other methodologies. These include SAS2 (developed by Daniel Buckles and Jacques Chevalier of Carleton University), Accountability Learning and Planning System (ALPS, developed by ActionAid), Outcome Mapping (developed by IDRC), and Learning Before During and After (LBDA). Typically these are developed with action research in mind. Smaller organizations face significant challenges of capacity, resources, and time in balancing RBM+ models with RBM requirements. In order to address these challenges, Canada World Youth has convened a Community of Practice (CoP), *Bridging Gaps*, to facilitate a dialogue between CCSOs, networks, and donors on these alternative approaches.¹

¹ A concise table of RBM+ methodologies is available in Jean Christie's "Evaluation of Development Action – Why? Of What? For Whom? The Challenges of Evaluation, as seen by some Canadian CSOs" (2008) or for a study of the potentials and limitations of RBM+ methodologies see Christie's "Expanding the Evaluation Repertoire: Summary Observations on Four Case Studies on Evaluation Design" (2010).

1.4.4 Communities of Practice (CoPs) are working groups of individuals within organizations or across organizations, convened to share knowledge and learning on mutual interests. They develop a unique perspective and a common body of knowledge, practices and approaches through formal or informal engagement between individuals in a group setting (Wenger, 2002; Britton, 2005). They have received considerable attention in both the corporate and non-profit worlds as essential tools for fostering knowledge sharing by providing situated, context sensitive sites for mutual learning. A major advantage of CoPs is that they can reveal tacit practice-based knowledge to be articulated in a manner that makes it accessible and pertinent (Ferguson et al., 2010).

While many CoPs are face-to-face, they are increasingly going virtual to connect far-flung geographic partners, which introduces unique challenges in maintaining distributed relationships and common motivation or the long-term investment required in growing and supporting social media (Hildreth, 2004). The experiences of the SEED Initiative in creating a virtual platform (VP) as a CoP shows that these challenges can be addressed by recognizing that VP conveners may have to exert considerable effort in understanding member contexts, producing (initially) the bulk of the online dialogue, establishing personal connections, and acting as bridging organizations to establish trust to enable local learning (Creech, 2012).

Regional, national, and international councils or networks can play a significant role in convening and supporting face-to-face or virtual CoPs given their knowledge of common concerns or issues. Large donors may also play a role in supporting these CoPs, either financially or by recognizing the inherent worth of such endeavours. CoPs may also encourage their member organizations to share their successes and lessons from field research and interventions, so that organizations do not duplicate previous work and are able to apply new ways of addressing their goals of development and social change. A notable example of this is *Genre en Pratique*, a CoP convened by the *Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale*, which shares the results and lessons from activities undertaken by its members in research and interventions with a focus on gender mainstreaming.

1.4.5 Partnerships and Collaboration with Universities can be fruitful sources of mutual learning. Gall et al.'s 2009 study of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's CURA program showed that deeper CSO engagement with academic research partners can inform not only advocacy but also organizational directions and operations. Chernikova's (2010) analysis of collaboration between universities and CSOs found that working with academics assists CSOs in strategic planning and decision-making. Such collaborations may also grant CSOs access to larger networks, which can result in business development, or access to human resources or expertise they may not otherwise be aware of. In turn, CSOs can share their own expertise and local networks with academics to enhance the 'on-the-ground' experiences of academics and students.

These relationships are not without their challenges, most notably cost-sharing and differences in institutional structure and culture. As a professor involved in such partnerships noted:

"A lot of the academic research tends to be critical and sometime this can be perceived as undermining the institutions or organizations, NGOs are trying to keep their position strong. This might also create

a tension depending on how much people really want to look critically at things and at the work they are doing”

And also,

“This research can be refreshing for professors: university people need to start working horizontally...The longer you work at the university, the stronger you believe in yourself being an expert. We need to get out as often as possible from a pure university context.” (Dominique Caouette, Université de Montréal, quoted in Chernikova, 2010).

Tensions can be further intensified by a power imbalance between professors, whose jobs are more secure, and employees of CSOs who operate with uncertain funding. These issues may potentially be resolved by carefully considering the roles and responsibilities of each partner prior to engaging with research. Potentially, codes of conduct, ethical guidelines, and research protocols developed prior to collaboration or partnerships that take both partner’s needs and challenges into account may alleviate such tensions. The *Community Fisheries Management Handbook* notes that research protocols may be developed into legal contracts that offer protection to either partner (Graham, Charles & Bull, 2006).

1.4.6 Shared Spaces are work and meeting areas shared between many organizations from different spheres of civil society and the private sector. A major concern to some CSOs is that a lack of external interaction and competence “impedes the re-thinking of basic organizational principles and values (double loop learning), while putting undue emphasis on the reinforcement of technical competencies (single loop learning)” (Krohinkel-Karlsson, 16). Shared spaces can foster learning for innovation by encouraging a reflective attitude with the recognition that complex problems require collaboration and co-inquiry between the non-profit and for-profit sectors, including start-ups, CSOs, individuals and academia. As a reaction to funding cutbacks the incentives for cost sharing have grown and co-location offers a number of solutions to these pressures: shared workspace to cut down on expenses; expert advice to provide programmatic, strategic, administrative and/or financial support; as well as a common area to learn informally from one another. This allows a physical space for cross-sectoral collaboration and wider community networks to foster innovative and effective solutions to common problems.

1.5 Other Challenges to Learning

While many challenges were noted in the previous section, there are several other important challenges faced by CSOs working in the development sector. Some of these are challenges shared with the development community at large, including donors and larger NGOs: internal change fatigue, geographical distance between partners, competing beneficiary and donor requirements, and measuring the impact of knowledge strategies and networks. Others affect smaller CSOs disproportionately due to their unique situations: capacity, risk aversion, trust and competitive behaviour.

1.5.1 Internal change fatigue is a challenge common to all organizations that work in a dynamic and complex environment. CSOs are actively involved in changing the environments around them for the better, but can themselves suffer from ‘change fatigue’ (O’Malley and Donoghue, 2001). Larger organizations are not immune to this either, where re-organization or ICT interventions can result in internal distrust and fatigue, hampering further knowledge and learning efforts (Weaver, 2010). This

stems from information overload and demands from both donors and beneficiaries for improved responsiveness, adaptation, and measurement of impact. Large amounts of information may be exchanged each day (through e-mail, updating intranet and internet webpages, staff contact information, etc.), but with little time for learning from this information or for storing and codifying it for ease of use at a later date. This speaks to the need for a coherent **knowledge management** strategy that takes into account the capabilities of an organization and its goals, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to KM that imposes a system from above. It also speaks to the need for gradual re-organization that takes into account the time and ability of staff to adapt to learning efforts – and the problems of project life cycles and staff turnover.

Britton makes a poignant statement that learning and change do not have to be 'big.' Change fatigue may stem from such 'blue-sky thinking' that do not take into account everyday activities:

“Those whose formal education has not extended to tertiary level may undervalue their potential contributions because they mistakenly believe that learning requires developing profound new ideas whereas what may be more valuable is simply improving routine practices.” (Britton, 2005; 23)

1.5.2 Power hierarchies are inherent pitfalls that make it difficult to achieve the full potential of knowledge and learning activities. For CCSOs that act as intermediaries between donors and beneficiaries, or those who partner with organizations in the Global South, this may be doubly so because of competing demands and needs within their networks. Perhaps the best lesson is that best practices “impl[y] an approach that works in a particular context is replicable in another, irrespective of localization and context” (Ferguson et al., 2008). There is also a concern that some approaches to KM will lead to the transformation of knowledge into a commodity, with implications over who controls knowledge and the resulting power relations. Britton (2005) warns that this could push partners further apart rather than enabling closer relations. To counter this he recommends that knowledge and learning activities have an explicit focus on Southern knowledge needs and challenges, whatever they may be (information exchange, infrastructure, etc.), and that they make use of a variety of tools (co-hosting conferences and workshops, demand-driven research done with Global South partners, etc.),

Ferguson et al. (2008) go further than providing tools or activities to lessen power hierarchies by examining *why* knowledge asymmetries occur. The authors point to the fact that CSOs often assume they know reality as it is in the Global South and design interventions based on these assumptions, with the result that they cannot respond effectively to the problems or needs of the beneficiaries. They note that research findings of actors in the Global North are not disseminated in the Global South and so fail to find their way to those who may have the greatest interest in them. Moreover, Southern research findings are often not disseminated widely and so have a deeply reduced impact on Northern agendas. Finally, stakeholders may be insufficiently equipped to participate in high-level dialogues that affect policy and decision-making.

These asymmetries typify many of the learning and knowledge challenges within the development field. CCSOs with active partnerships and engagement with citizens in the Global South are

well poised to confront such asymmetries in their activities. Their activities often go beyond pure research to action research with social change in mind, and the relationships they build with their partners are well placed to challenge the commodification of knowledge. These opportunities for mutual learning and context-specific knowledge can be shared and disseminated with donors, academics, and other CSOs in both the North and the South to show new ways of confronting development challenges.

1.5.3 Trust and competitive behaviour present a major challenge to CSOs insofar as this is a serious barrier to inter-organisational knowledge sharing and learning. Forsyth and Maclachlan (2009) note that information on NGO attitudes towards inter-organizational learning is lacking, and seek to address this gap. They re-affirm the importance of context of relationships and inter-organisational learning as a crucial site of learning (see also Britton, 2005, and; Ferguson et al., 2008). However, sharing knowledge in a competitive market creates perverse incentives to keep knowledge within an organization. Moreover, smaller organizations may not be able to attend all meetings of a CoP or spend as much time networking as they would like. It may also be difficult for the same representative to attend CoPs or regular meetings, indicating a lack of a formal structure to plan for learning that requires consistent attendance.

Despite these difficulties, Forsyth and Maclachlan identified a number of opportunities for CSOs to partner for research on learning and knowledge, for greater influence over public perceptions of CSOs and for joint fundraising. These are mechanisms that a number of Canadian CSOs have been able to use, such as COPs (*Bridging Gaps*, coordinated by Canada World Youth), councils (the Inter-Council Network's seven thematic Knowledge Hubs), and joint appeal instances (the Humanitarian Coalition).²

1.5.4 Competing beneficiary and donor demands are a common challenge to all CSOs. Each is a distinct group that requires a different strategy for interaction and change. The strategic knowledge of how to influence each may be split within organizations by necessity. Thus, counter to Senge's (1990) assertion that an organization ought to be treated as a harmonious entity, CSOs may require distinct learning strategies that allow them to learn from, and adapt to, donor and beneficiary needs (Hovland, 2003; see also Krohwinkel-Karlsson, 2007). As key intermediaries between donors and beneficiaries CSOs have responded by developing new approaches to learning and knowledge, such as the aforementioned RBM+ models that strive to balance learning from research and experiences with financial accounting and results monitoring.

1.5.5 The geographical distance between partners or between headquarters and field operations can also hinder learning and knowledge strategies. These can lead to information gaps and tensions when trying to balance information flow between far-flung actors. Field staff are often overwhelmed with the contextual situation 'on the ground' and with making immediate decisions concerning programming,

² These issues are somewhat related to the open-data concept that has recently caught significant traction within some parts of Canadian Civil Society that are not involved in international development. A recent workshop, Open Data Day Toronto, featured case studies and brief presentations on the benefits of open-data and shared information by approximately 30 organizations involved in civic engagement and advocacy in the Greater Toronto Area. These presentations focussed on how open-data can shape strategic directions and inform social justice activities. It remains to be seen if the open data concept may offer solutions to the CCSOs involved in international development and cooperation.

while head offices are focussed on funding, donors, and strategic decision-making related to organizational concerns. This leads to a gap between the expectations of each group, with HQ requesting information from field staff that may not have the time to respond quickly or in the manner requested (Suzuki, 1998). Suzuki makes no strict recommendations for overcoming this challenge, which may be inherent to the nature of international business and development. Instead, he stresses that organizations must create processes to alleviate the tension as best as they can, given their organizational structures and needs.

A common criticism of knowledge transfer within international development is that it unfairly favors Northern organizations, rather than its intended beneficiaries in the South (Hovland 2003; Britton, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2008). Hovland recommends combining KM and learning strategies with an explicit focus on Southern knowledge needs and challenges, while Britton recommends that a humble attitude underpins learning and “also encourages each partner to value and respect the other’s experience” to take the focus away from financial transactions that can be the root of power imbalances (Britton, 2005). Ferguson et al. echo the ideals of action research to note that a focus on epistemic diversity, inclusiveness and mutual learning are central to overcoming the tensions that result from geographic distance and power imbalances between the North and South.

Geographical distance is not necessarily a burden; CSOs are uniquely placed to have knowledge of local actors and context as well as of national and international trends (Hovland, 2003). If leveraged correctly, this knowledge can contribute to internal learning as well as that of donors, beneficiaries, and partners such as academics or other CSOs.

1.5.6 Measuring the impact of Communities of Practice and Shared Spaces. Measuring the impact of networks that result in intangible benefits such as increased knowledge, greater learning, or improved strategic directions and operations can be difficult. This is in part due to the possibility of distorting knowledge in a ‘teach to test’ environment, as well as the difficulty in measuring less tangible outcomes in a learning network. Wenger (2002) notes several methods: the systematic collection of anecdotal evidence to capture the range and diversities of activities, which helps to capture value added but also share lessons; competitions to identify the ‘best’ stories from members, and; quantitative measurement of community activities, knowledge assets, and performance outcomes. At each step of the measurement process the purpose, level of focus, and balance between over- and under-management should be kept in mind.

James (2010) explicitly addresses CoPs between different organizations and the challenges of measuring their values. He distinguishes between changes that can be measured and those that can only be illustrated and identifies six levels of potential evaluation: the number and type of learning activities and their outputs, such as case studies or praxis notes; members’ engagement in CoP activities; the quality of learning outputs; learning outcomes and impacts; the relationships that develop between members; and, the impacts of the CoP on non-members.

The goals of knowledge and learning activities are to increase the capacity of organizations to think creatively and act innovatively. There are considerable limitations to any organization’s own

learning, but this is a particularly acute concern to smaller CSOs. These have limited resources, time and budgets to incorporate learning and knowledge into their approaches, let alone those of their partners in the Global South. It is among this group that donors may support, but not impose, learning strategies undertaken by CCSOs. Imposed strategies rarely make lasting change and may in fact undermine organizational learning and knowledge. Depending on the organization, capacity building for learning may be to support KM strategies, Communities of Practice, Shared Spaces, or providing an enabling environment etc. It may be that building learning capacity is more important than creating processes for information storage and retrieval, as ICT-intense KM interventions can be costly and cumbersome.

While smaller CSOs may have less time and resources than larger ones, their virtue is that their size can make them more adaptive and responsive than larger organizations, if they have learning and knowledge activities incorporated holistically into their strategies (Hovland, 2003).

1.6 Research Questions

Much of the literature on learning and knowledge focusses on larger NGOs and donors rather than the other constellations of organizations that make up Civil Society as a whole; CSOs, excluding large NGOs, are rarely noted in the major studies and theoretical implications of KM, OL, OK, and LO approaches. Moreover, the literature focusses on learning and knowledge in general, rather than how CSOs incorporate the lessons and learning which they glean from their research and interventions into their organizational directions and operations. As we move towards the post-2015 era and beyond the Millennium Development Goals there will be new roles for CSOs to play, some of which have been addressed by the Open Forum on Aid Effectiveness. While some work has been done within the Canadian context (largely by CCIC), it is uncertain how CCSOs are currently planning to incorporate the Istanbul Principles into their research and interventions and how they might be changing their organizational directions and operations as a result.

The broad objective of this research project is to explore how CCSOs move from their field results to organizational improvement; how they learn from work in international development and cooperation. More specific objectives are 1) to document and analyze selected Canadian organizations' recent experience with self-evaluations and other self-learning activities; 2) to identify and explain these organizations' critical learning from these exercises; 3) to examine these organizations' application of lessons to their organizational directions and operations; 4) to assess challenges and opportunities of these organizations' approaches, 5) to verify the extent to which lessons are shared by these organizations with larger communities, in Canada and/or abroad; and 6) to assess key means regional councils and networks use to support their membership in learning from their field results and disseminating the resulting knowledge.

Chapter 2: Survey Findings

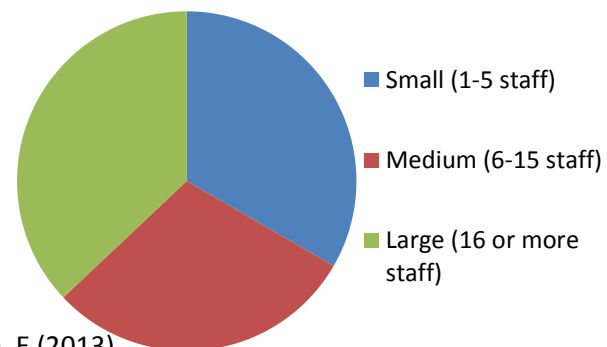
2.1 Overview of Findings

The findings and conclusions of this chapter are based on two surveys conducted to provide an overview of how Canadian civil society organizations (CCSOs) engage with learning from their field work and activities. One survey targeted CCSOs that produce research from their field work. Organizations were first drawn from a 2008-2013 database of Canadian Partnerships' Program applicants. This was then expanded using the membership lists of Canadian networks/councils, through web-based searches, and organizations recommended by those who completed the survey. The specific aims of the survey were to assess the extent of learning strategies, the specific organizational aspects of learning which CCSOs target, the means and activities that they use to incorporate learning into their work, and the challenges they face when doing so.

A second survey targeted connective organizations such as coalitions, councils, and networks to provide an overview of how these organizations support their memberships in their learning and knowledge activities. This survey was distributed to all regional/provincial councils, the inter-council networks, and several other organizations that coordinate and convene learning activities as part of their mandates. The primary focus of this survey was on how networks support the learning activities of their memberships, the activities they convene, and the challenges they themselves face in promoting learning activities.

The first survey was distributed to 126 organizations and targeted CEO/Executive Director/upper management levels of organizations. If there was a clear knowledge management officer, or a prior IDRC connection with the organization, these individuals were contacted first. Of the 126 contacted organizations, 31 responded for a response rate of 25%. Two declined to participate while two others were unable to complete the online survey, due to technical issues with the survey software. Thus, these findings are based on the responses of 27 respondents. Of these, 9 were small organizations (1-5 staff), 8 were medium organizations (6-15 staff), and 10 were large organizations (16 or more staff).³ Twenty-one of these respondents were upper

Figure 1: Organizations by Staff Size



Source = Smith, E (2013)
n=27

³ Based on *** by CCIC

management – CEOs or executive directors. The second survey was distributed to 20 organizations that make up national and provincial networks, of which 11 replied for a response rate of 55%. Two were unable to provide full responses because they do not support membership or learning activities relevant to this study. As such, these findings are based on the responses of 9 organizations.

These two general surveys found that most responding CCSOs participate in many formal learning activities and have clear learning strategies to guide them when learning from their work and practices. Networks respond to and support the learning strategies of their members by providing networking opportunities, workshops, webinars, and other activities to convene CCSOs. They provide context analyses to the Canadian civil society sector by mapping and researching emerging trends which can support the overall learning strategies of CCSOs. In general, CCSO learning strategies support many facets of their organization through internal and external activities. Most, but not all, CCSOs share their lessons with others in the wider development community. However, they prefer to disseminate these lessons through face-to-face activities rather than in published reports and briefs.

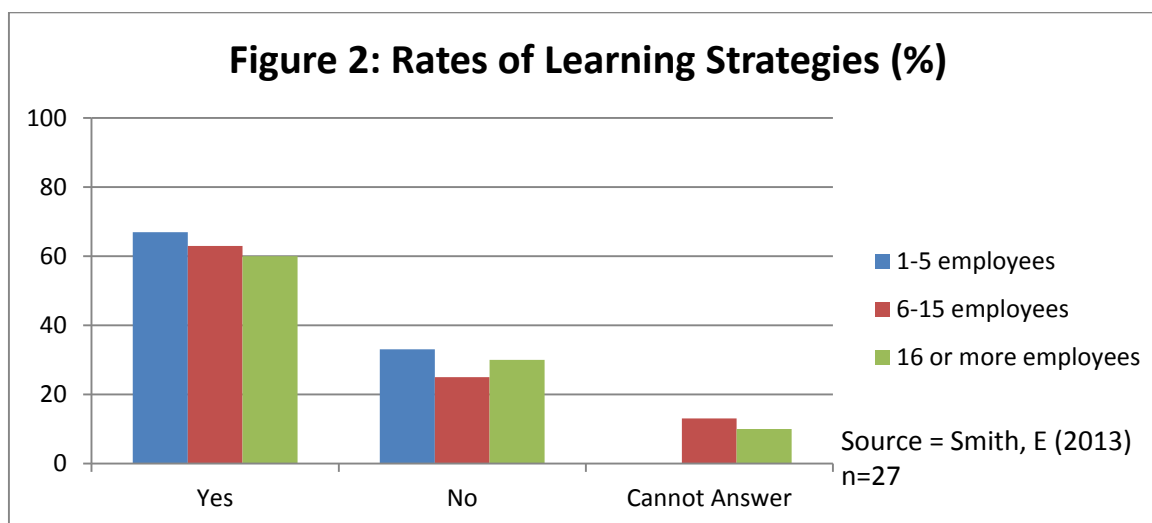
While it seems that Canada's civil society is actively engaged in learning and sharing lessons, organisations face significant challenges in documenting, applying, and sharing lessons. Moreover, specific challenges and opportunities vary greatly and often depend on the number of employees of an organization. Beyond these individual activities, Canadian councils and coalitions are instrumental in providing venues for CCSOs to learn and disseminate lessons from their work. While coalitions and councils themselves face similar challenges and constraints they continue to support their memberships' knowledge and learning needs.

The initial surveys were followed by emails, interviews and conversations with three provincial councils and 16 CCSOs. In some cases, informants were different members of the organization but were typically executive directors or vice presidents for international programs. Interviews confirmed findings and provided insight into particular learning strategies, directions, and initiatives, as well as deeper reflection on challenges and opportunities CCSOs have experienced.

2.2 Do CCSOs have Clear Learning Strategies?

To determine the extent to which organizations self-identify as having learning strategies, the survey asked "Would you say that your organization has a clear strategy for its staff and the organization as a whole to learn from its own activities and practices?" 63% of the organizations surveyed have clear strategies, 27% do not and 10% could not answer. These rates were similar regardless of the number of employees within an organization (see figure 2), so the size of staff does not seem to have an impact on the existence of a learning strategy in the organization. However, those organizations without clear strategies noted that underfunding and overwhelming workloads makes it difficult to analyze material and to convene formal learning/knowledge-sharing activities that can support the formulation of clear learning strategies. However, even without clear learning strategies all CCSOs engage in learning and knowledge-sharing and typically have elements of such a strategy, even if narrowly focussed on one or several aspects of their organization. In the words of one such organization "While I wouldn't say we have

a "clear strategy" for staff and the organization as a whole to learn from its own activities and practices, we do have elements of such a strategy (e.g. inclusion of specific learning and knowledge-sharing priorities in our Strategic Plan, development of an employee learning and development policy) and areas of 'embedded' good practice."



2.3 Directions of Organizational Learning

To determine the particular approaches that CCSOs use in applying their knowledge strategies to their overall directions and operations respondents were asked "Which aspects of your organization benefit from your learning activities and means - in what sense do they help your organization improve itself?" While there was no strong correlation between whether or not organizations had a clear strategy for learning and the aspects of their organization which they target, those organizations that do have a clear strategy for learning noted that their organizational direction is heavily informed by grounded learning. This tends to focus on linking organizational learning to unit outcomes, project design/implementation, and their partnership models and procedures with refinement and modification as the project unfolds. This approach connects conceptual learning to applied- and process- oriented learning, using clear procedures and benchmarking activities. For example, the Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning's HiMaT Indigenous Leadership and Development program focusses on capacity building of Pakistani NGOs at "at three levels: a) grassroots individuals (women, youth, men, elders), b) communities and c) institutions. The challenge is to develop sufficient capacity at the nexus of these three constituents of the development process that may result in improved development outcomes. Quarterly forums are held that involve ongoing training, reflection on development processes already underway and the refinement of plans for the future."

This clarity of purpose allows organizations to capture and analyze organizational, staff and partner knowledge at critical junctures – the locations where knowledge transfer occurs. Identifying these knowledge nexuses can provide access to organizational experiences that can be applied to aspects of the

organization, including communications, fundraising, project planning, strategy, research, policy, and evaluation.

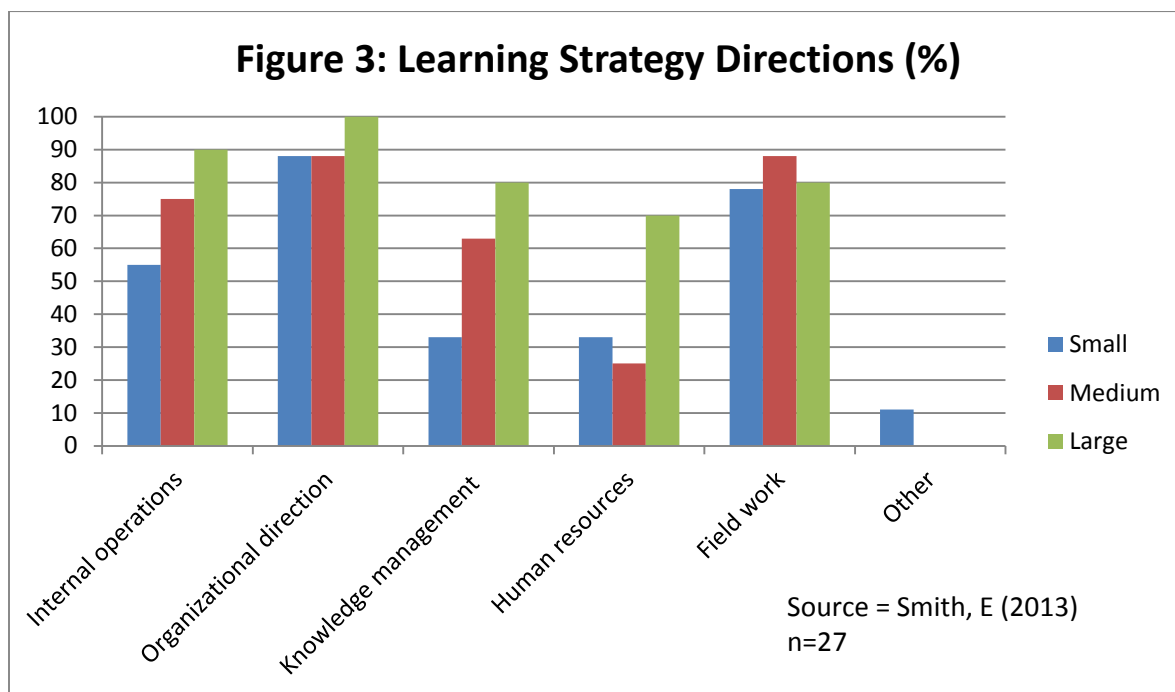


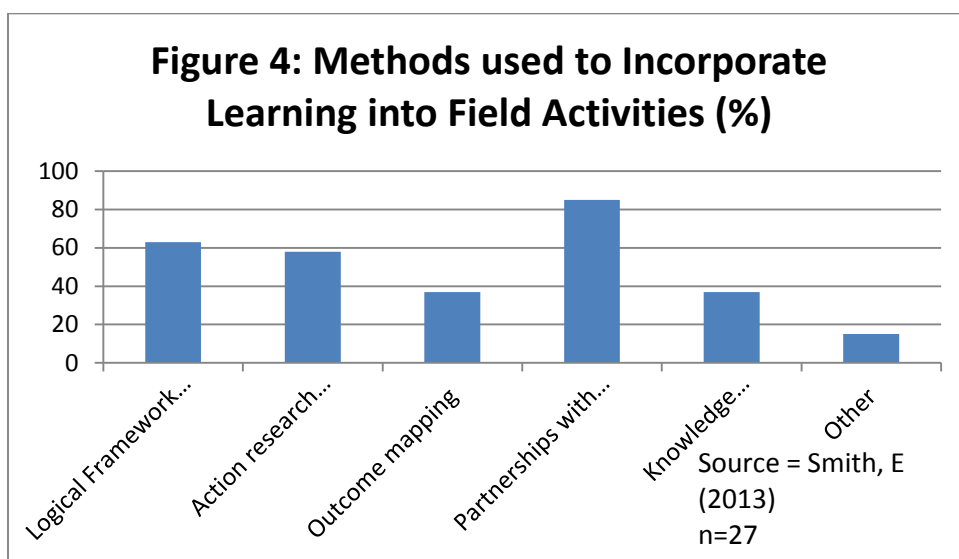
Figure 3 illustrates the distributions of responses per staff size category, across various strategy areas of the organizations. Organization size affects which aspects of an organization are targeted for improvement. Small organizations' learning focusses on the conceptual (the organization's vision, mission strategy, etc.) and applied (field research, interventions, exchanges/internships and collaboration) aspects of organizational strategy. Medium organizations focus on these conceptual and applied aspects at similar rates, but address more often content-based (knowledge management, data storage, and intranets/extranets) and process-based (internal efficiency, work plans, procedures and guidelines, etc.) aspects. Large organizations have the broadest learning strategies and highest rates targeting all aspects of their organizations. Their applied learning is more frequently oriented towards their human resources needs than in both small and medium organizations. This broadening of goals is not surprising – as organizations grow they tend to have broader and more numerous goals and increased capacity to learn and apply lessons to the various facets of their operations. However, this also requires a concurrent expansion of knowledge management tools and solutions to convert tacit/implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge and useable data. More efficient internal procedures and guidelines ensure that this data is effectively applied to improving the organization.

The great majority (82%) of organizations indicate that their field work benefits from their learning activities. Field work referred to “field research, interventions, student or professional exchanges, internships, collaboration with Southern partners, etc.” to encompass the wide variety of activities that CCSOs support in the Global South. There does not seem to be any correlation between having a clear learning strategy and whether or not field activities are a specific target of organizational improvement. However, those organizations that do not target learning/improvement to their field work are typically

engaged in civic engagement, education, and aid disbursal rather than direct research or activities in the field. It may be that they do not view these field activities as a priority for organizational improvement, compared to others, as such field activities are primarily managed and run by partners in the field with less engagement from Canadian staff.

2.4 How do CCSOs Foster Learning from Field Work?

To determine the processes by which CCSOs ensure that learning is integrated into field activities the survey asked “What means does your organization use to incorporate learning activities into your evaluations and field work?” Figure 4 shows the rates at which organizations use logical framework approaches, action research methodologies, outcome mapping, partnerships, knowledge management, and other tools to incorporate learning into their field activities. Figure 5 describes these same responses arranged by CSO size. The survey found that partnerships are used by 85% of responding organizations, logical framework approaches by 63%, and action research methodology by 58% them. Outcome mapping and knowledge management e-tools are both used by 37% of organizations. Other approaches used include earmarking funds for knowledge and sharing activities within particular projects.



The most prevalent means of fostering learning is through the use of partnerships. The question did not ask with whom these partnerships take (this has previously been examined in Travers, 2011). Follow-up interviews confirmed that most formal partnerships are between CCSOs and SCSOs, though there are many partnerships for learning in communities of practice, formal networks (such as the Tobacco Control Network), and informal mentorships between established and new organizations. Small organizations (100% of their respondents) tend to partner the most, followed by large organizations (80%) and medium organizations (75%).

Half of those organizations that do not use partnerships for learning indicated that they do not have clear learning strategies or are unable to answer that question; among those that do partner only 35% indicated “no” or “cannot answer” to having a clear learning strategy. This indicates that those

without clear learning strategies are less likely to partner for learning purposes, because effective partnerships require a clear approach to knowledge, distinct learning goals, and a focussed strategy of organizational improvement. Interviews indicated that without clearly articulated purposes and a motivation for learning it is unlikely that collaborations for learning are successful. The remainder of those that do not partner with others for learning tend to be large and medium sized organizations with highly focussed mandates or geographic regions of interest. It seems likely that their specific approaches or specialized interests make it difficult to find appropriate partners, either within Canada or the developing world.

The second most prevalent means of incorporating learning activities into field work are logical framework approaches. LFA monitoring and evaluation is often a donor requirement to ensure accountability. Its purpose is to ensure that learning and project/process improvements are a part of project lifecycles. However, LFA has been criticized for making it difficult for CSOs to balance the goal of learning from past work with the goal of accounting to donors and beneficiaries. They also provide a perverse incentive to focus only on the positive aspects of a project, neglecting deficiencies or downfalls that can be improved upon in future activities. It is largely agreed that Results Based Management (RBM) frameworks in particular are also more easily put into practice by donors and large CSOs with greater capacity and resources. Smaller CSOs, such as grass-roots or community-based organizations with less experience and capacity may experience frustration when planning via an RBM/LFA approach. This is borne out by the survey, which found that only 55% of smaller organizations use LFAs while 80% of large organizations do.

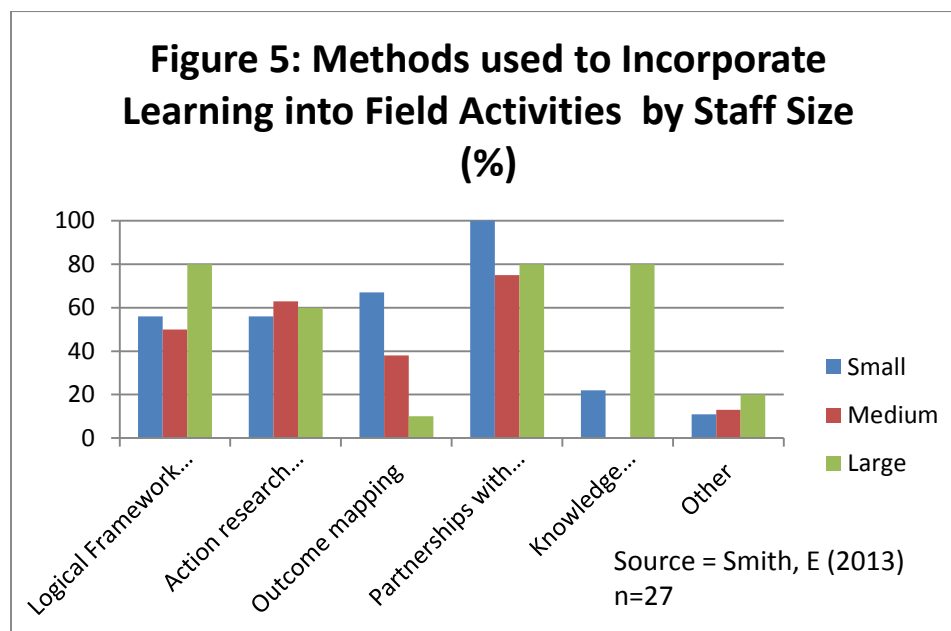
Interviews confirmed that many small organizations find LFA monitoring frustrating, difficult to learn from, and burdensome. One noted that it is “not a flexible enough system to account for the ongoing learning and changing. It’s not a learning-oriented system. It’s a summative accountability system. It’s difficult to predict where we are going to be two or three years down the road so when you start to apply it in reporting later it’s like stuffing things in holes they don’t belong in.” For these reasons, they choose not to use an LFA for learning and instead integrate Outcome Mapping and other learning tools to gain knowledge of their work. However, others use LFAs to great success and have managed to integrate them into their learning priorities and objectives. One organization noted that:

“That sort of process is something that we’ve really invested in. And we find actually that when partners are focused on results rather than activities we are actually realizing more benefits for the beneficiaries and making the projects more fluid and more responsive to the conditions that are going on. Absolutely [we find LFA/RBM] useful. I’ve been doing this job for 10 years so I’ve gone through a lot of learning and honing of my skills through RBM. At first it seemed totally overwhelming [but] I’ve learned to reduce them quite a bit and reporting on that becomes easier.”

- Lorraine Swift, Change for Children

While Change for Children does use outcome mapping to guide visioning processes and to ensure that partners are well trained, there were clear trends from those organizations that find LFA effective. They

had great experience and knowledge of them, used brief frameworks, used some flexibility in measuring indicators, and had consistent liaison officers in CIDA/DFATD which reduced transactional time.



Action research methodologies are used by a slight majority of all respondents, regardless of the number of employees. These approaches emphasize learning as a key aspect of research to gain knowledge from diverse sources and develop well-informed action to influence policy and practice. It must be noted that this question should have made the distinction between participatory action research and action research. The former approach to social change in the development context emphasizes that research must be done ‘with’ people, not ‘on’ or ‘for’ them, if it is to effectively address the needs of individuals. Those organizations that do not use LFA methodologies to incorporate learning are more likely to use action research methodology to support learning from their field work - 80% of those respondents that do not use LFA to incorporate learning into their activities use action research methodologies. There seems to be a clear preference for action research amongst those organizations that do not use LFA. This indicates that the two are difficult to use in tandem or that for these organizations LFA approaches are not used as learning tools.

For small organizations outcome mapping (OM) is the second most prevalent method of incorporating learning into their field activities. A majority (67%) of small organizations use OM, while 38% of medium organizations do so and only 10% of large organizations do likewise. OM is an evaluation tool that shifts from assessing the products of an intervention to examining changes in behaviour, actions or activities of those involved in a development program. It is applicable at the project, program, or institutional level. Part of its attraction to small organizations may be its adaptability, that many resources are available at no cost and there is a lively community within Canada and abroad that have used it extensively. Follow-up conversations revealed that OM is not used exclusively to refer to IDRC’s evaluation tool, though many organizations were aware of it. Those organizations that use IDRC’s OM appreciate it for its flexibility, participatory nature, and ability to draw our reflective lessons. Small

organizations that use OM appreciate the flexibility that it offers and the manner in which it can be used to examine ongoing change within projects. Medium and large organizations that use OM tend to do so for strategic visioning processes, but tend not to use it for learning at the project level. Many of those that do not use OM recognize it may be a useful tool; however, as it is not a requirement of donors, they prefer not to duplicate work. One large organization shared that:

“It may fit with the organization and it seems that it would have some relevance to our way of working. The logic model is too simplistic and doesn’t take into account the complexity and unanticipated results. There is always the challenge of attribution and linking those to outcomes and impacts. These are challenges and we are looking into outcome mapping.”

Tommy Ngai, CAWST

Knowledge management e-tools (such as online document storage, collaborative e-tools and virtual platforms) are used almost exclusively by large organizations to learn from their field activities. This is partly a result of larger projects that involve more people and the need to formalize knowledge capture, collaboration and sharing when dealing with more numerous stakeholders and larger geographic areas. However, it is also due to the upfront cost of knowledge management software and other tools, which are more economical for larger organizations due to economies of scale. Follow-up questions revealed that many knowledge management e-tools are either developed in house or are purchased from third-parties. While these offer advantages over other forms of databases and knowledge management software, the time and cost spent developing them can be prohibitive. These knowledge management tools also serve different purposes, such as creating donor databases or engaging overseas staff and partners. Typically, such functions remain separate but as the 3rd generation of KM tools evolve these are more often being streamlined into a single system.

2.5 How do Organizations Collect and Disseminate Knowledge Internally?

To understand how learning is incorporated into the internal operations of organizations, the survey asked “What activities within your organization are used to collect and share knowledge gained from its work?” In other words, how organizations share the knowledge gained from their activities within the organization itself and at what rates these various means are used. Figure 6 shows that the two most popular means of sharing knowledge are through forms of written communication (staff reports at 78% and travel reports at 74%). This is unsurprising as these can be easily disseminated to multiple individuals and captured in document retrieval systems at a relatively low cost. Of those who use neither staff nor travel reports (7% of respondents) one is an organization with very few employees, while the other is currently investing in increasing their capacity as a knowledge organization. The next most prevalent means of sharing knowledge internally are weekly meetings, annual/semi-annual retreats, and learning forums (each at a rate of 59% of respondents). These verbal means of sharing information may be less efficient in some ways, but facilitate the processes of mutual learning better than written communication or less interactive forms of learning. Finally, learning lunches are used by 56% of respondents and other activities (including annual general meetings, workshops and periodic reflection documents) are used by

30% of the respondents. These face-to-face and iterative means to knowledge-sharing are better at conveying, though perhaps not documenting, tacit, experiential, and contextual knowledge, which is critical in the complex landscape of development actors.

Follow-up interviews confirmed that knowledge management is central to leveraging internal knowledge. One respondent shared: “Improved knowledge management activities have greatly enhanced the exchange of best practices and lessons learned among staff and partners in our national and international programs. This has helped to improve our overall effectiveness as an organization” (Gale Lee, Vice-president, International services, CESO). It is not enough to merely share knowledge in a face-to-face manner; the results of such conversations must be captured and used. KM practices enable efficient dissemination of knowledge and can, with some difficulty, capture experiential knowledge.

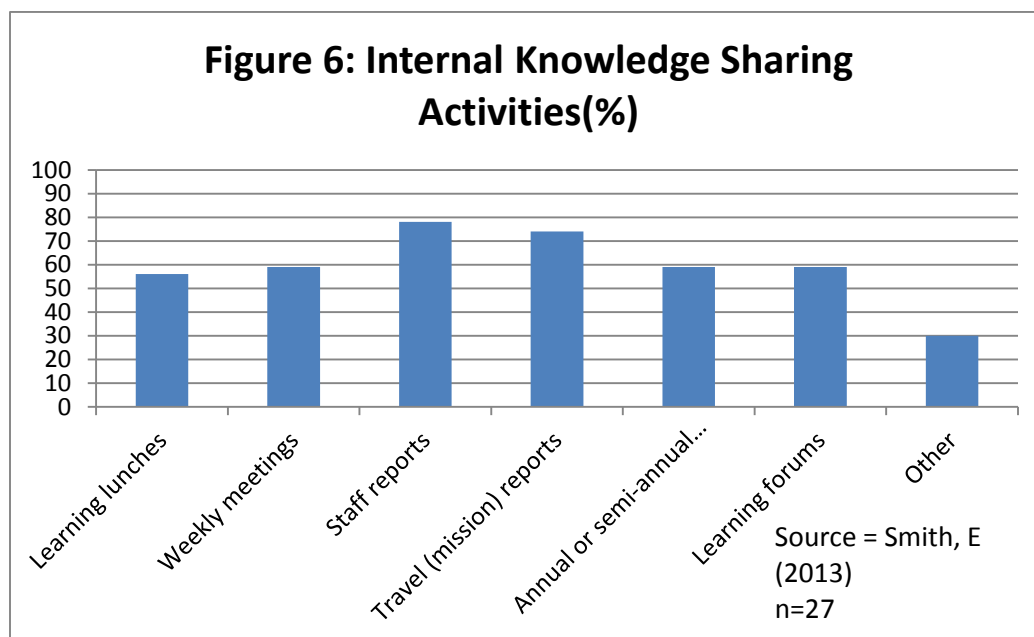
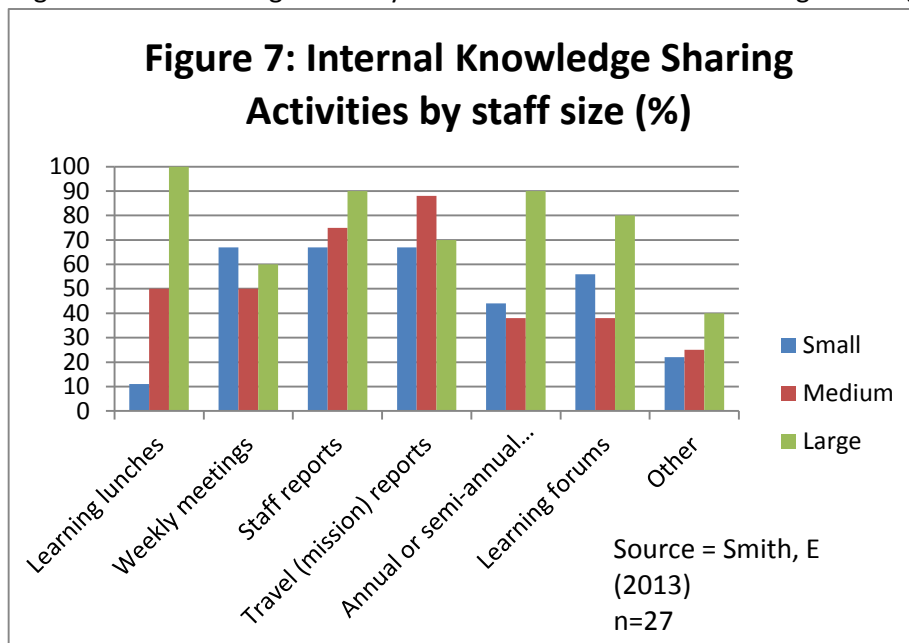


Figure 7 reveals the different needs and capacities of small, medium and large organizations when incorporating knowledge-sharing into their internal operations. Small organizations tend to use fewer

formal staff activities while organizations with larger staff systematize their internal knowledge-sharing practices and organize formal internal events for knowledge transfer.

While all large organizations and 50% of medium-sized organizations use learning lunches to share and collect knowledge, only one small organization does so. This difference extends to other systematized and formalized events, such as annual/semi-annual



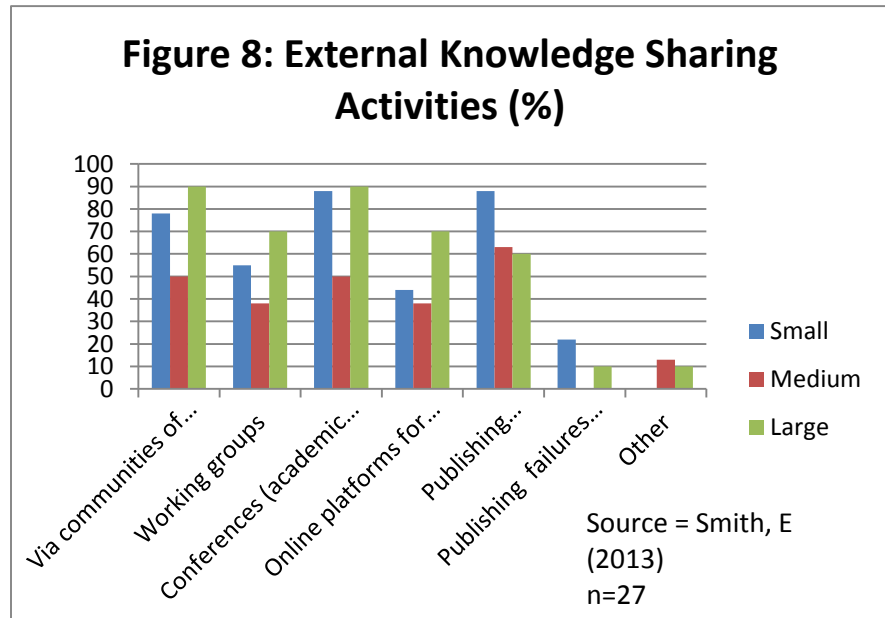
retreats and learning forums, which large organizations tend to engage in at higher rates than organizations with fewer employees. Learning lunches provide semi-structured means of sharing knowledge within organizations on a topic of interest, perhaps recent research, new activities or travel. At times they may feature an individual external to the organization who comes to share his or her expertise. Similarly, learning forums on a particular topic of interest or aspect of the organization, such as particular projects or tools, can provide semi-structured and face-to-face learning opportunities. Annual and semi-annual retreats provide the opportunity to reflect on broader aspects of the organization's direction and operation, the accomplishments of the past year, and on future directions. They can inform and deepen understanding across the organization and ensure that programs and projects act holistically and in concert with one another.

The differences in rates for such activities may be due to both their cost and their necessity in the larger organizations, where it is more difficult to share knowledge naturally and informally. This may be further compounded by field offices or regional employees. Thus it may be imperative to have structured or semi-structured activities to bring employees together around topics of interest to share knowledge and to determine organizational priorities. Conversely, small organizations tend to operate in small offices, may not have regional employees, and so do not require formal activities to structure their knowledge-sharing and learning. One respondent noted that: "our small organization operates in a shared open office space which facilitates this process naturally and in a continual informal process." However, those are small and medium organizations that lacking learning strategies are less likely to have annual or semi-annual retreats. Other means of sharing knowledge within organizations include intranets, mentoring programs, Skype meetings, and reflection documents.

2.6 How do Organizations Share Lessons with Others?

To determine the activities which CCSOs use to share lessons and knowledge externally with other organizations, respondents were asked “If applicable, how does your organization share its lessons with others?” Responding CCSOs engage in various types of activities to share their lessons with others. On average, CCSOs use 3.5 types of activities to share their lessons with others. The most common means of

sharing lessons is through various types of conferences (78%), followed by engaging in communities of practice (74%) publishing reports, papers or briefs (70%), working groups (56%) and online platforms (52%). Only 11% of organizations engage in publishing failures reports, despite accolades that this approach has received in recent years.



These figures indicate that in regards to formal activities CCSOs tend to share lessons more often in a face-to-face manner rather than through publishing and disseminating material. Several follow-up interviews revealed that written reports often do not generate enough interest and that it is hard to measure the use of such reports. As such it seems that verbal communication is preferred as it offers a richer dialogue and greater degree of trust and value for time, while there are disincentives to disseminating information publicly due to competition. Moreover, they provide ample opportunity to connect on a personal or less formal level. This in turn could encourage organizations to keep knowledge internal or to share it in less formal manners. Publically admitting failure or acknowledging faults to other organizations or donors could negatively impact visibility and future fundraising activities, despite its value to the community at large. However, small organizations tend to publish written materials (such as reports, papers, briefs, and failure reports) more often than medium and large organizations. This may be because they may have lower profiles than medium and larger organizations so the benefits of becoming better known outweigh disincentives related to competitiveness. Unfortunately, it was not possible to assess the quality or substance of these written materials, or how often these are publically disseminated.

The aforementioned trust and competitiveness issues may explain why conferences are the preferred means of sharing lessons. Conferences provide a platform by which lessons, new directions and research can be formally disseminated in an academic or professional manner, while also providing opportunities for informal conversations on topics that are difficult to discuss publically. Working groups

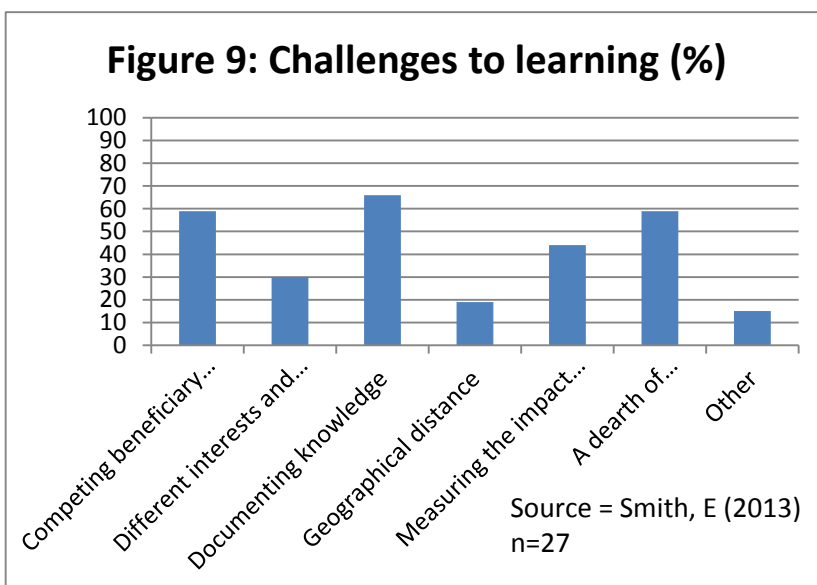
and communities of practice also provide similar opportunities, but may or may not produce outputs that in turn can be disseminated to the wider development community and public.

The most striking finding of this question is that medium-sized organizations tend to participate in fewer (average 2.6/organization) and a narrower range of activities than either small or large organizations. This is consistent with the findings of section 1.5 and 1.7, which show that medium-sized organizations tend to have fewer internal knowledge-sharing activities and face significant challenges in documenting knowledge and may lack resources and capacity to participate in learning and knowledge activities. It may well be that as organizations expand their reach, mandates, and activities their knowledge-sharing diminishes in priority compared to other activities: “When resources are available we invest in research and learning. When funding is scarce, these activities are sacrificed.”

2.7 What Challenges do CCSOs Face in their Learning Activities?

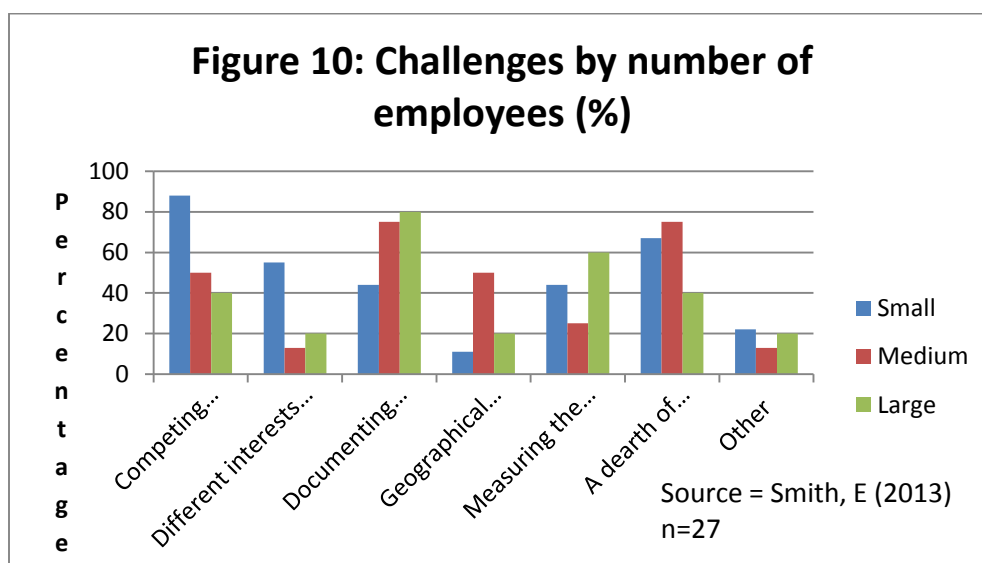
Question 6 asked “What challenges has your organization experienced in learning and knowledge-sharing activities?” This question was aimed at determining the broader challenges that CCSOs experience when learning and sharing lessons. We found that the majority of organizations face significant challenges (see Figure 9) but that the incidence of different challenges is highly dependent on the staff size of the organization (see Figure 10).

The most common challenge is related to documenting knowledge, with 66% of CCSOs noting that this is a concern. This is related to the next most common challenges which are “balancing beneficiary and donor demands” and a “dearth of resources/capacity” (59%). Beneficiaries and donors have different knowledge needs and organizations are typically pushed to provide financial accountability and information to donors rather than to beneficiaries. Measuring the impact of knowledge networks, such as communities of practice, learning forums, or inter-organizational activities is also a challenge noted by 44% of respondents. Finally, “different interests and expectations when working with partners” and “geographical distance” at 30% and 20% respectively are the least common challenges, perhaps because long-distance partnerships are a common and constant activity within the CCSO community. Other learning challenges are “finding appropriate partners who actually understand the dynamics of a learning and action approach”; “fostering a learning culture, better integration of



explicit learning / sharing priorities into plans and budgets, persistence of "silos"; and, a "shortage of Canadian expertise to draw from in the humanitarian field."

Certain challenges are much more prevalent at particular organizational sizes. Small organizations find "balancing competing beneficiary and donor demands" (88%) and "different interests and expectations of partners" (55%) to be important. Due to their smaller operating budgets and visibility they may have less clout when working with partners, but they may also have fewer staff to manage existing and newly formed relationships. Medium and large organizations reported that "balancing beneficiary and donor demands" is also a challenge, but in a smaller proportion than small organizations, with 50% of medium and 40% of large organizations responding that this is a challenge. "Different interests and expectations" is also a less widely reported challenge, at 13% of medium and 20% of large organizations. This may be because they have greater visibility and clout in partnerships, but also they likely have more experience in partnering and balancing the needs of donors and beneficiaries.



While 44% of small organizations report that documenting knowledge is a challenge, the responses from medium and large organizations suggest that effectively documenting knowledge becomes more difficult as organizations grow: 75% of medium and 80% of large organizations report that this as a challenge. This may be particularly germane to medium and large organizations due to the larger volume of knowledge which they produce and the difficulties inherent to sharing tacit knowledge, as this is best communicated and shared through socialization rather than through knowledge management tools. One large organization noted that they find "fostering a learning culture, better integration of explicit learning / sharing priorities into plans and budgets, [and the] persistence of "silos"" to be enduring challenges. Experiential knowledge is more easily shared through informal and intimate processes and face-to-face interactions. It is perhaps for this reason that smaller organizations do not have as much difficulty documenting and sharing their knowledge: their internal operations are integrated and therefore not as "siloed."

While 59% of all organizations surveyed and 40% of large organizations indicate that a dearth of resources/capacity is a challenge, this is particularly acute for small and medium organizations, of which 67% and 75%, respectively, reported as a challenge. This may be because their funding is less stable than that of larger organizations or they may be less able to compete for large grants. Regardless, it is a significant challenge in the non-profit sector that has likely become more acute in the last several years as Canadian Official Development Assistance has been untied and directed towards other types of organizations. This dearth of resources is not merely a perception amongst organizations, but is confirmed by trends in Canada's ODA. Aidwatch Canada and CCIC's *Analysis of Budget 2013* notes that Canada's 2013 Budget "did confirm that significant cuts to Canadian ODA, announced last year in Budget 2012, will continue into 2014/15."⁴

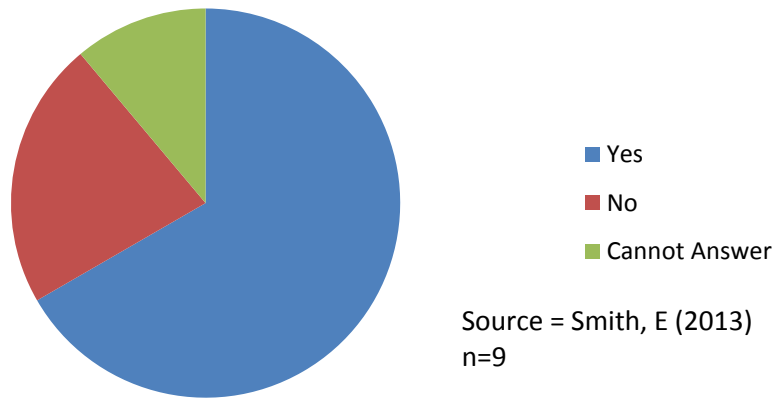
Finally, geographical distance was highly reported by medium organizations as a challenge, while measuring the impact of knowledge networks was reported as a challenge by small and medium organizations. As noted in section 1.6, medium organizations tend to share less and in narrower variety of activities than both small and large organizations. These challenges with geographical distances may explain why medium organizations tend to participate in fewer knowledge-sharing activities and why small and large organizations find measuring the impact of knowledge networks to be a challenge. The persistence of siloes may also be a result of geographically dispersed staff and language issues. In subsequent interviews, medium and large organizations noted that silos are persistent and while they take corrective measure to prevent them, this can be a great challenge.

2.8 The role of Councils in Learning

The survey of councils and networks was sent to 20 organizations that have memberships made up of Canadian Civil Society Organizations. These included the provincial and national councils for international cooperation. The councils and networks were first asked "Would you say that your organization has a clear strategy to support your members' ability to learn from their activities and practices?" The survey found that 62.5% have clear strategies, 25% do not, and 12.5% are unable to answer (see figure 11). This is comparable to the rates of learning strategies of CCSOs. While not all organizations have a clear strategy to support their members' learning activities, all organizations support a range of aspects of organizational learning and convene a broad variety of activities to support the collection and sharing of knowledge within the broader international development community. The highest rates of support are for internal operations and organizational direction (78% of councils/networks), followed by knowledge management and field research (at 55%) and human resources (22%). Other aspects of organizational learning are supported by 55% of respondents.

⁴ This analysis finds that Canadian Official Development assistance continues to decline from \$5.5 billion in 2010 and 2011 to (estimated) \$5.2 billion in 2013/14 and \$5 billion in 2014/15. CCIC and Aidwatch Canada estimate that by 2015 budget cuts will have removed nearly \$1.4 billion from Canada's official development assistance. It also notes that "general funding for civil society organizations (CSOs) and specific funding for the volunteer sending CSOs, has been put on hold for the past two years, and new projects approved for specific purposes have been significantly delayed."

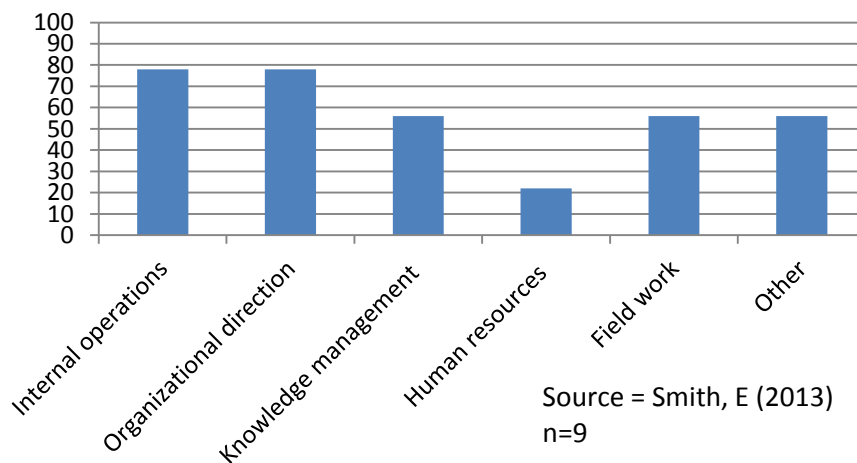
Figure 11: Strategies to Support Memberships



2.9 Council support for Organizational Learning

To determine what areas of organizational improvement councils provided assistance in, the survey asked “Which aspects of organizational learning does your organization support – in what sense do you help your membership improve?” (see Figure 12). Councils support conceptual (the organization’s vision, mission strategy, etc.), applied (human resources, field research, interventions, exchanges/internships and collaboration), process-based (internal efficiency, work plans, procedures and guidelines, etc.), and content-based (knowledge management, data storage, and intranets/extranets) learning. Other aspects or activities they support include outreach, overall regional/provincial strategies, and peer-review processes.

Figure 12: Supported aspects of Organizational Learning (%)



In regards to supporting the internal operations (“internal efficiency, work plans, team meetings, procedures, guidelines, etc.”) of their members, most councils offer help in financial management, personal security, and fund diversification. For some councils/networks, this support is provided through monthly meetings or targeted workshops on administrative and management issues, while for others their codes of ethics and strategic plans provide best practices that offer some guidance in regards to internal operations.

Councils support the organizational direction of their memberships in 4 main areas: in partnering, in development principles and ethics, in their strategic planning, and communications strategies. Councils do this by offering published materials, toolkits, and workshops. This may be done through published materials or tools (such as partnership assessment tools), but are often workshops and other face-to-face activities on aspects of organizational direction, such as new and emerging trends. For example, CCIC produced a timely report on OECD donor approaches to growth and the private sector that has been widely distributed and contains practical approaches to moving the discussion forward. Most organizations offer best practices and occasional workshops for public engagement and one is piloting workshops that specifically target conducting media interviews and liaising with the press.

In regards to knowledge management, networks and councils often provide specialty software or subscriptions for project management. Most have member-only platforms, though there is some difficulty keeping users engaged and active on these virtual platforms. However, other initiatives include projects to harmonize knowledge of research and other activities within particular countries to more effectively coordinate interventions and field activities.

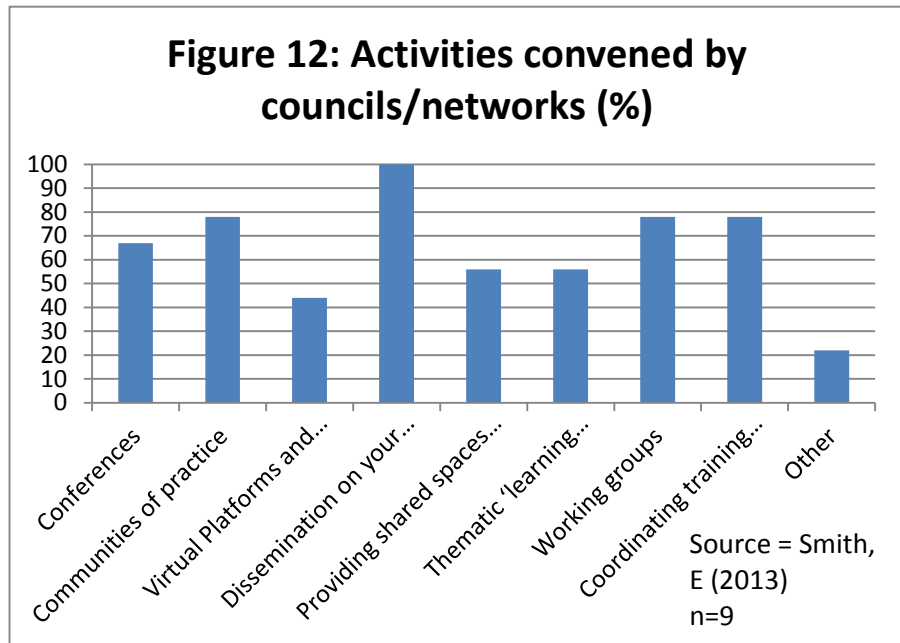
Human resources is the organizational aspect least likely to be supported by councils and networks. This is not surprising given the results seen in section 1.3 Directions of Organizational Learning, which found that human resources is a learning priority for only 1/3 of CCSOs. Of the two respondents who indicated they support the human resource needs of their members, this takes the form of peer-to-peer learning and professional development workshops, so there is significant crossover between these activities and their regular activities that support the organizational directions of their membership.

To promote the field work of their members, councils and networks are active in implementing internships abroad, supporting collaborations/partnerships, and networking groups/communities of practice. For example, one network supports groups “on Internship/Volunteer Sending, Safety and Security Management and Disability Inclusion” and in the past “have also convened NWGs on HIV and AIDS, public engagement/global citizenship and fundraising.” While some do not coordinate internships, they may support student and professional exchanges between their member institutions through formal memoranda of understanding.

Other aspects that councils support are public engagement, specific learning events, peer-review evaluation processes, and national initiatives that link relevant themes and members with one another. These may be stand-alone activities, or ones that are affiliated/connected calendar days, such as International Development Days. For example, OCIC’s Focus in Development series currently profiles good practices of their membership in achieving the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness.

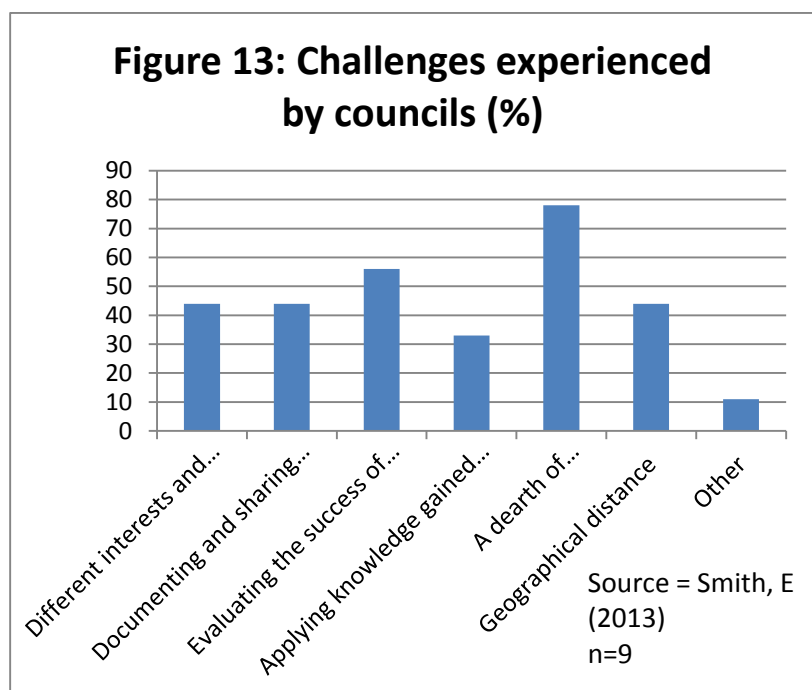
2.10 Council Activities

To determine what learning activities councils support and coordinate to consolidate and disseminate knowledge, respondents were asked “What activities does your organization convene that support your membership in collecting and sharing their knowledge within the international development and cooperation community, in Canada or abroad?” The most prevalent activity is the dissemination of members’ information on council/network websites, which all survey respondents do. This is followed by the coordination of communities of practice, working groups, training/workshops (each of which is supported by 78% of



the respondents), and conferences (65%). Shared collaborative work spaces (56%), thematic learning lunches (56%) and virtual platforms/online tools (44%) are used less frequently.

These results indicate that while councils and networks engage most frequently in dissemination of information on their websites, their main role in bringing together and supporting the learning of their membership occurs on a face-to-face basis. While some organizations produce outputs derived from their communities of practice, working groups, and/or workshops, it is unclear if all councils and networks view this as a priority. While some disseminate these deliverables publicly, for others these are considered internal and private activities that are not disseminated to the community at large or to the public. We saw in section 1.5 that documenting and sharing knowledge is a challenge for CCSOs and it seems that this is shared with councils and



networks and may arise due to the related challenge of a dearth of resources/capacity.

2.11 Challenges for Councils

To better understand the challenges that councils themselves face the survey asked “What challenges has your organization experienced in learning and knowledge sharing activities?” Councils and networks face similar challenges as CCSOS but at different rates (see Figure 13). 88% of councils indicated that a dearth of resources/capacity is a challenge in their learning and knowledge-sharing activities. This is followed by the challenge of evaluating the impact of knowledge networks (56%). Different interests and expectations, documenting and sharing knowledge, and geographical distance were reported by 44% of respondents as challenges. It seems that the number one challenge is that while councils and networks have a diverse mandate to support all of their members in a variety of needs, knowledge and learning may not be a primary focus due to a lack of resources and capacity. Further, as knowledge networks are challenging to evaluate, they may be difficult to justify in times of budgetary constraints. As one respondent noted: “people are so stretched these days that I find learning and knowledge exchange is not a priority, even though people clearly benefit greatly from it when it happens.” This is also compounded by the fact that learning takes place at a number of organizational levels and that as another respondent noted “Staff and peer review volunteers may have learned a lot from reviewing project proposals and final reports, but converting that knowledge into ways we can share it with others in the community. It takes time and effort to do this work. From our Knowledge Hub experience, people appreciate sharing their experience and see how it can be further developed together.” With a myriad of other activities, not to mention outreach to the Canadian public (the main mandate of most regional councils and other networks), the act of knowledge translation is more difficult.

2.12 Case Selection

Based on these findings and interviews, four case studies were selected to examine the purposes and challenges of recent CCSO learning initiatives. These were chosen to respect differences in size, directions of learning initiatives, and key challenges identified through the survey. As such they complement the survey by highlighting organizations’ learning cultures and strategies, types of learning initiatives, and key challenges and factors of success in overcoming these.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

Few studies have been done on organizational learning (OL) in the civil society context, and even fewer in the Canadian CSO context. A literature review (Chapter 1) found that studies about organizational improvement with a development focus examine large institutions and funders, rather than common recipients of those funds – smaller not-for-profit institutions that work with their counterparts in developing countries. The Istanbul Principles call on CSOs to be knowledge creators and brokers, but little work examines how they are doing so. Survey findings indicated that CCSOs are engaged in a variety of knowledge creation and knowledge-sharing activities to improve the work they do. This chapter analyzes the purposes and challenges of four CCSO learning initiatives.

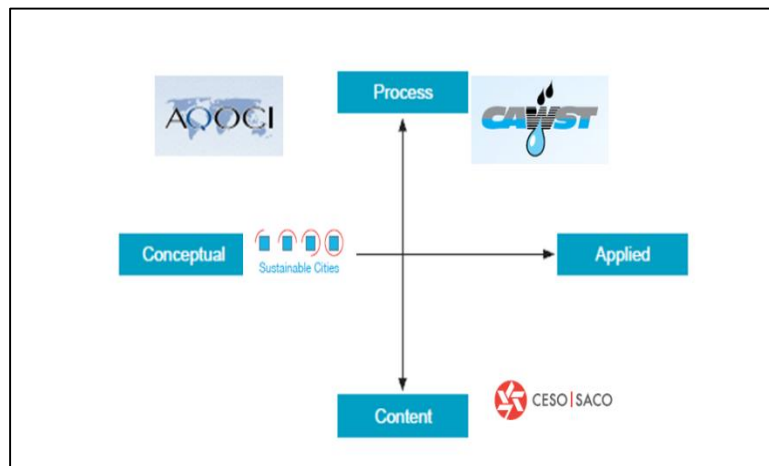


Figure 14: Case Studies

The four case studies target headquarters-level learning initiatives rather than field work. While learning by doing occurs in the field, it is often at headquarters that lessons are synthesized and analyzed to inform future organizational strategies. As such the aim of these studies is to examine the overall learning strategies and styles of these organizations. These inform future directions and field work when impacts and lessons are documented and applied. The four case studies were selected to represent organizational sizes (one small, two large) and the different types of learning initiatives: conceptual (Sustainable Cities International's organizational strategy); content-based (CESO's revision of their monitoring and evaluation); process-based (CAWST's systematization of internal operations and structures that facilitate knowledge flow and decision-making); and, inter-organizational learning (*Genre en Pratique*, a community of practice coordinated by AQOCI). Applied initiatives (targeting the ICT systems that capture knowledge) are represented in the cases of CAWST and CESO.

Figure 14 represents the cases graphically. Sustainable Cities International, which is along the conceptual line, developed a new business strategy to move away from public funding by reducing overhead and building new or enhanced relationships with universities and the private sector. In the content-applied quadrant is CESO. Their initiative aimed to consolidate and streamline the data they were collecting to provide a uniform framework for the monitoring and evaluation. CAWST is in the process-applied quadrant. It formalized and systematized decision-making processes to enhance face-to-face learning and

capture tacit knowledge. Last, is AQOCI in the process-conceptual quadrant. AQOCI supports and coordinates a community of practice that documents members' learning and brings knowledge back to their institutions, in the form of enhanced gender equity policies and programs.

It might seem that these are disparate initiatives with little in common. However, there are common elements to the approaches that helped foster organizational learning. First, the studies provide examples of “positive deviancies” – organizational learning initiatives that have been effective in dealing with internal or external pressures. Organizations faced similar challenges when securing senior management and staff support; in identifying the needs of their own organization, partners, and donors; in developing purposeful processes that transform data into knowledge; and, when maximizing the use of internal and network capacity. The case studies follow a common structure by providing an organizational overview, identifying the challenges that prompted the initiatives, describing the learning strategy used, and identifying key challenges and factors of success.⁵

Sustainable Cities International⁶

Sustainable Cities International (SCI) was founded in 1993 (after the Rio Earth Conference) to connect Canadian experts to their private, public, civil society and academic counterparts around the world and encourages sound city planning. Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, staff support urban growth management, urban infrastructure, poverty reduction, resource efficiency, and renewable energy.

In 2003 SCI launched the Sustainable Cities Network to build capacity for long range urban sustainability planning and implementation. The model for the Network is peer-to-peer learning and content is driven by the needs of its members. This has since become the major facet of their operations and has expanded to include 40 cities in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. Whether it is planning the future of a whole city or implementing a smaller-scale project, SCI taps into the current knowledge and expertise of its Sustainable Cities International Network of cities and bring appropriate skillsets to the table.

As the convener, facilitator, and administrator of the SCI Network, staff must be deeply engaged with issues that members are currently facing and prioritizing, the strategies and actions they take to move forward. To support a diverse network in a changing and unpredictable environment, SCI's overall approach is based in a Developmental Evaluation Model to help their members continually innovate. This requires SCI staff to be flexible in planning and implementing projects that assemble members around common interests and constraints while identifying expertise within the network that can be leveraged. It also requires that the staff remain at the forefront of emerging trends and debates on urban sustainability.

SCI is a small organization and depends on its many partners and associates to provide targeted and timely

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all facts and information referenced in this case study are based on interviews with staff from Sustainable Cities International in Vancouver, Canada, on 30 July 2013; by phone in Ottawa, Canada on 19 September 2013 and 1 November 2013.

Sustainable Cities International

Sustainable Cities International (SCI) is a charity and non-profit organization. Core staff in Vancouver and a network of international associates work with cities to bring about change towards urban sustainability. Their activities focus on building human capacity so that innovation and change in urban sustainability can occur.

SCI brings together the business community, civil society organizations and various levels of government to tackle urban issues. They provide guidance on urban sustainability strategies and projects through the SCI Network, the SCI Energy Lab, an affiliated researcher program, and service delivery.

SCI Network: The SCI Network is a global network of 40 cities with the shared goal of building more sustainable futures. Cities within the network act as 'urban laboratories' by adopting innovations, then implementing and improving them, while sharing their experiences with the network and others. Activities include peer-exchange, an annual symposium, training events, and dialogue through webinars.

SCI Energy Lab: The SCI Energy Lab is a cohort of 10 cities that works to build human capacity on energy sustainability.

Affiliate Researcher Program (ARP): ARP brings together graduate students

interventions and knowledge transfer. While their size allows them the flexibility to react quickly to current and emerging issues, small CSOs engaged in international cooperation, which may be highly dependent on official public funding, can be particularly affected by shifts in public policy and spending priorities. In light of this, SCI's biggest challenge is to diversify their revenue base while continuing their core activities, and improving the work they do.

To address these challenges, SCI recognizes the need to:

- a) balance the different needs and expectations of partners and clients; and,
- b) move away from programs dependent on public funding in a more competitive external environment for sources of funding.

The first challenge is one that many CSOs face but is particularly acute for smaller ones. Understanding the expectations and needs of partners, and balancing these with one's own organizational capacity can be a lengthy and iterative process. Finally, to collect the kinds of information required for reporting from partners in the field may not align with their priorities and can challenge their capacities and experience. The danger is that organizations may spend more time on reporting than on actually executing the project. This can transform a project from being a horizontal partnership with face-to-face communication to a vertical or extractive one, exacerbating tensions inherent to any relationship.

The second is a result of changed Canadian government priorities for accessing official development aid. Many Canadian CSOs have had to pursue alternate sources of funding, such as charitable foundations and the corporate sector. With more CSOs seeking funding from these sectors, competition has become more acute. This is particularly challenging for organizations that may have depended on government funds for large proportions of their annual budgets, or for smaller organizations where one large grant could make up the majority of their funding.

"It is now even more competitive in order to get funding from foundations and the corporate sector if you do not have an existing relationship. Focusing on relationship building has become a matter of survival."

- Jane McRae, Chief
Executive Officer,
Sustainable Cities

A New Strategic Direction

To address these challenges, SCI undertook a strategic planning exercise in 2010. Up to this point, the organization had been primarily dependent on federal government funding for its relatively large and complex international development projects. Working groups of staff and board members spent the next year refining their business model. The new strategic direction included moving away from programs dependent on public funding and expanding consulting services. The organizational focus now includes diversifying and building new programs, adding a fee-for-service component to its offerings, and reducing overhead. Services now being offered include the following: visioning and strategic sustainability planning workshops; scenario-setting and infrastructure cost studies; urban sustainability project management; municipal leadership training workshop; and, the design and delivery of multi-stakeholder participatory processes.

The diversification and creation of new programs has enabled SCI to better respond to the needs and expectations of its partners. To determine these, SCI staff take three approaches: a steering committee, structured questions, and direct interaction with members. All of these feed back into the organizations other activities to identify trends in urban sustainability. From these priorities, SCI can focus its learning and activities. The capacity to do so is based on available resources, expertise within the network, and members' time constraints.

To connect members, SCI contacts relevant experts and determines their ability to provide targeted and timely interventions and knowledge transfer. Staff then facilitate introductions and provide pertinent background information to the interested parties. If necessary, staff can also administer online platforms for dialogue, such as webinars. For issues of wider interest, SCI develops new projects to enable knowledge transfer and creation, which can then inform future directions.

Key components of SCI's strategy include a greater emphasis on research, diversifying program and project funding, and reducing operating costs.

Greater Emphasis on Research: SCI is diversifying its work by assigning high priority to research and producing research reports. This is expected to help them better support the knowledge needs of their partners and access sources of funding that demand greater research capacity. To achieve this, SCI has deepened its engagement with universities and research centres in Canada and abroad. Staff regularly take part in relevant university colloquia, such as SFU's Global Exploration, Mining and Minerals dialogue series. Forums such as these have helped SCI identify current debates and controversies.

An Affiliated Researcher Program was set up to link graduate students with Network member cities who would benefit from having research projects focused on their current issues and challenges. The organization has also undertaken a number of collaborative research projects in the past few years, such as a recent mapping project on behalf of UNEP's Global Initiative on Resource Efficiency in Cities (GI-REC) and participation in the Meeting Climate Change Challenges in B.C. (MC3), a collaborative research project undertaken by the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and Royal Roads University.

Diversifying Program and Project Funding: increasingly, SCI is reaching out to new sources of funding from like-minded private sector actors when there may be an alignment of interests. SCI is careful to make clear their own principles when entering into such partnerships, to ensure that they do not lose sight of their vision and that their work is not compromised by the interests of the private sector. While partnerships can be easily facilitated when there are direct benefits to both SCI and the private sector, this can be more difficult when there is only an indirect benefit.

SCI once provided service delivery only to network members, which was subsidized through CIDA grants. As a result of a more competitive funding environment, they have broadened their client base to include all municipalities. This now includes a greater number of North American and European cities. This move towards consulting services allows SCI to leverage their relationships with other networks and cities, while still providing their core service of knowledge transfer and peer-exchange to Network cities.

For issues of wider interest, SCI develops new projects. These projects provide longer-term support for research and action on urban sustainability. A recent example is the newly launched SCI Energy Lab, a program consisting of a cohort of 10 cities. Initial funding to launch the program came from Siemens Canada, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation and National Resources Canada. The Energy lab addresses the barriers that prevent large-scale uptake of renewable energy technology. One of the goals is to provide a business case for cross-sectoral approaches to sustainable energy development.

Lowering operating costs: to keep operating costs minimal SCI has continually sought out innovative partnerships that are of mutual benefit to organizations or individuals involved. They have not found it difficult to identify appropriate and enthusiastic volunteers, to whom they are able to provide relevant and interesting work. This creates situations where all parties win and have an incentive to support one another. Jane McRae, CEO of SCI, also notes that they “have become more flexible in terms of allowing staff to work from home when the setup and responsibilities allow for it.”

HiVE Workspace: to further reduce overhead, SCI has moved to a shared workspace at HiVE Vancouver. HiVE is a non-profit working space that offers desk, meeting, and event space to organizations committed to environmental and social sustainability. Members have access to infrastructure such as business equipment, internet, and a receptionist. The move to a shared space has been a positive change as it provides greater opportunities for closer collaboration and networking with other organizations in Vancouver also working out of HiVe.

Partnering with university language studies departments: traditionally, SCI has outsourced its document translation requirements. Recently, crowdsourcing of Spanish translation was undertaken in an effort to reduce translation time and lower costs on a substantial document. However, the quality of the translated chapters varied greatly and key

SCI Energy Lab

What? Launched in July of 2013, the SCI Energy lab is a network of 10 initial cities representing different regions, political contexts, and socio-economic conditions.

Why? To provide a multidisciplinary forum for collaboration and idea generation on sustainable urban energy systems

How? A diverse membership will enrich perspectives and dialogue to enable innovation through workshops, technical support, applied research and city visits.

The SCI Energy Lab emerged when several member cities expressed an interest in how climate change impacts would affect energy sources and how cities could transform to more sustainable energy sources within their region.

Within the existing network there was not enough expertise and leadership on this topic, so SCI put out a call to other networks (such as Energy Cities in Europe) to find cities that had adopted long-term goals on energy reduction and renewable energies. This was targeted not at the world's leading megacities, but ones that were at various stages of implementation and might benefit from each other's experiences.

The SCI Energy Lab goal is to strengthen capacity for innovation in local, sustainable energy solutions for cities.

For more information see:
<http://sustainablecities.net/our-work/sci-energy-lab>

terms were not consistently used. Faced with the prospect of a low-quality output than desired, the organization chose to seek out a student in a university language studies department to re-translate the document. While it took time to locate the correct student, the final document was consistently translated throughout and was of high quality, which has allowed SCI to share the document publically.

“This is one of the most attractive things [about the HiVE] – it really allows us to connect with the sustainability movement in Vancouver because the HiVE has become a space for these organizations to gather.”

Edna Aguinaga, Network Project Officer, Latin America

Key Challenges Encountered

Documenting knowledge: This challenge is two-fold for SCI. SCI does document and record for its funders and this does support some knowledge capture. However, this knowledge capture is very much dictated by funder requirements and does not necessarily account for the needs of SCI and member municipalities. Due to lack of capacity, some lessons are not as extensively documented as SCI desires. While some of these functions are embedded into the organizational culture of SCI, there is less pressure to formally and systematically document lessons from activities and projects. Knowledge is more often transferred within SCI through face-to-face conversations and meetings. The amount of time required to document these interactions does not reflect an efficient use of resources. Furthermore, written documents may not suit the learning needs of SCI Network members, who prefer to share experiences through webinars, where they can talk to one another and ask questions in an iterative manner.

Critical Factors of Success

Membership: SCI’s Network membership is flexible, enthusiastic to learn, and has great expertise. They are willing to share knowledge with one another and SCI staff and recognize the importance of doing so. The network is plugged into current and emerging issues, allowing SCI to be at the forefront of innovative strategies for urban sustainability. Moreover, Network events provide opportunities for engagement with and dialogue between the business community, civil society organizations and various levels of government on pertinent and timely issues. This helps SCI staff stay on the leading edge and better support their service delivery.

“Cities don’t have adequate resources or time to reflect and share on their practice. They’re good at documenting, but getting them to engage in learning is a challenge. Our goal is to build platforms that make it easier for city practitioners to learn from each other.”

Edna Aguinaga, Network Project Officer, Latin America

Small organizational size: SCI’s small team size has allowed them flexibility in operational expenses as well as work patterns and processes. While SCI has less time and resources than larger ones, their size

makes them adaptive and responsive to the external environment, as well as member and client needs. It also allowed SCI the ability to quickly transfer to a shared workspace when it became necessary, support flexible work processes, and develop new programs such as the SCI Energy Lab.

CESO Launches New Learning Framework⁷

In 2010 CESO conducted an internal review and restructuring to improve operations and develop a culture to nurture excellence, sharing, and learning. Prior to this review, CESO strategy was focused primarily on the number of Canadians volunteers sent abroad and their experiences as volunteers. Longer-term benefits and outcomes of their programming were assumed, but not systematically measured. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) focused on funder reporting relating to volunteers' activities and did not necessarily take into account the collective impact of the transfer of knowledge and skills or the broader development context. Over time, the organization had developed strong silos between its different Canadian offices, as well as its national and international program areas. Therefore a new strategic and operational plan was developed to address these challenges. This plan included several key areas: cultivating a culture of learning & accountability; program planning, delivery, evaluation & reflection; building an engaged workforce; and, communications and administration.

A critical element of CESO's restructuring was a renewed emphasis on monitoring, learning and evaluation (MLE), which had been heavily "siloed" from program operations. This shift was prompted by dissatisfaction among staff and partners with the current evaluation system as well as by an increasingly competitive environment for funding. This built on a new approach first introduced in 2008, CESO's partnership model, which fostered closer, longer-term collaboration between CESO and its partners. Among the challenges aforementioned, this revised and restructured M&E framework has significantly aided CESO with confronting:

- a) competing beneficiary and donor demands; and

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all facts and information referenced in this case study are based on interviews with staff from CESO in Ottawa, Canada, 9 and 15 October 2013; "Breaking Down Silos,: Program Collaboration and Innovation in Monitoring and Evaluation" a research report by Flavia Barandiaran; and "CESO: Attribution and Contribution interview on new approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)" an interview conducted by Daniel Buckles for *Innovations with Evaluation Methods* (2013).

See References for full citations.

CESO

Vision: a world where there are sustainable economic and social opportunities for all.

Mission: to strengthen economic and social well-being in Canada and abroad through engagement of skilled and experienced Canadian volunteers working co-operatively with our partners and clients to create solutions that foster long-term economic growth and self-reliance.

Service Areas: strategic planning; business development; accounting and finance; organizational development; community development; governance; and, productions and operations.

New Directions and initiatives:

1. Partner engagement: to better engage in longer-term relationships with clients and partners.
2. Evaluations: CESO has shifted to a new evaluations framework that prioritizes a participatory approach and is suited to both partners' and CESO's own evaluation needs.
3. Knowledge management: CESO has launched a new online database and knowledge management system to increase access and share information more efficiently.
4. Lead Volunteer Advisors (LVAs): LVAs with strong project management skills oversee partnerships throughout their duration, which situates short-term technical assistance within a longer-term relationship.

These initiatives have enabled CESO to scale up and better measure their results and impacts. A sequential approach to this has helped their clients and partners be an active part these improvements.

b) documenting and using knowledge.

The first challenge is related to the specific project information required for reporting back to major donors. This can isolate evaluations from program operations and planning because it is reactive to donor demands. An additional concern stems from CESO's unique focus on economic development, in that many partner organizations might not want to share sensitive business information. This can lead CSOs to prioritize accounting for resources rather than, documenting knowledge (successes, lessons and best practices) for future planning, or for providing feedback to stakeholders. However, MLE can be of great use beyond financial monitoring required by donors; CESO's initiative shows that targeted and strategic M&E can mediate between competing beneficiary and donor needs by responding to the financial, communications, and planning needs of partners.

The second challenge was of particular concern for CESO, due to the large volume of information and data which they produce themselves and have access to through their volunteers and partners. This included informal feedback, stories of progress and success, and formal volunteer, client, and partner feedback that was being collected differently by the international and national teams, as well as by the different Canadian offices of CESO. Although assignment-related reports were gathered regularly, this information remained largely in the hands of the Evaluations Department and was not shared across the program teams. CESO's challenge was to collect this information and transform the data into useable knowledge. CESO saw the opportunity to systematize their documentation of knowledge through their M&E initiative to create an improved data collection process, analyze the data and then feed the results into strategic planning and organizational learning.

In light of these challenges CESO embarked on a systematic process to break down barriers within the organization and develop an appropriate and consistent monitoring, **learning**, and evaluation (MLE) framework to fulfill both funder reporting and organizational learning requirements.

Mainstreaming Evaluations to Break Down Silos

CESO's review of their evaluations systems, until then primarily RBM-focused, was to ensure that a new MLE framework would serve the needs of staff across the organization and guide the wider implementation of the partnership model. Serendipitously, at the time of CESO's review, Canada World Youth was leading the Community of Practice (CoP) *Bridging Gaps* to bring together a group of CSOs and facilitate a dialogue on ways to efficiently meet financial accountability requirements from funders, while strengthening planning and evaluation for learning. The participatory approaches towards designing MLE, then being explored by the CoP, were incorporated into CESO's review. These approaches helped demonstrate to staff the broader purpose and applications of evaluations and the value that they could provide to programs and strategic planning. CESO moved forward purposively to create an RBM-based system that would also be flexible enough to take into account the needs of donors, staff and other stakeholders across national and international program contexts.

Bridging Gaps Community of Practice

Ten Canadian civil society organizations working at the international level are looking for ways to address problems in their planning, monitoring and evaluation systems. The challenge is to learn about and improve the effectiveness of development programming, as well as satisfy the demands of widely-used accountability frameworks such as Results-Based Management (RBM).

The project works through a community of practice (CoP) to:

- develop learning systems within the organizations involved that balance and integrate collaborative planning, evaluation and inquiry; and*
- document CoP innovation in learning systems research so as to facilitate dialogue with broader networks and donors on ways to combine learning with accountability.*

The general spirit of the approach has been to combine RBM with other monitoring and evaluation methodologies towards an “RBM+” approach that meets both the learning and accounting needs of the organizations involved.

(From Buckles and Madore, “Planning and Evaluation by Canadian Civil Society Organizations: Bridging Gaps between Methodologies” Project Report (2011))

In order to develop their strategy CESO’s Evaluations Department brought together key staff from the international program to determine which areas of M&E should be prioritized. SAS2 dialogue tools were used to lead participatory exercises and identify gaps and important issues in a manner sensitive to variations in language, levels of seniority, and M&E needs. These exercises showed that staff wanted monitoring and evaluation to be less redundant, more efficient and accurate, and to feed into planning and inquiry. They also made it clear that there were major delays in providing feedback to stakeholders – in some cases, volunteers and partners did not know the long-term result or assessment of their assignment. Internally, key lessons and best practices were not systematically shared with program staff in a timely manner, and therefore were often no longer relevant to the planning process. With this in mind, the CESO Evaluations team began working on an M&E framework that went beyond accounting for financial resources, which lowered the burden on partners and staff, and could produce results that would inform planning.

“We made a conscious effort to bring program staff, at different levels, into the evaluations process and this has really given different levels of staff ownership over the whole framework.”

Sheri Watson, CESO Vice President,
Partnerships and Program
Development

Canadian staff in other locations were soon involved in consultations to share their experiences with M&E systems and to articulate their monitoring processes and needs. As the review and redesign proceeded CESO brought 60 volunteers and partners into the dialogue to refine and replace M&E tools. As the Evaluation teams found when soliciting staff input, SAS2 tools were critical to capturing the experiences and tacit knowledge of these stakeholders. The tools also provided a useful framework through which tacit and heretofore unarticulated knowledge could be made explicit and analysed systematically.

The new MLE framework has created new reporting forms that combine staff and client feedback to reduce the amount of paperwork and provide context and elaborations where needed. The framework is flexible, insofar as it can take into account different program contexts by being more participatory and less paper-based. Conversation guides were developed to replace written reports when appropriate, allowing staff to gather feedback over the phone or in person, which combines communications and reporting activities. The Evaluations team has made disseminating final evaluations a priority, which has been greatly appreciated by stakeholders and has addressed issues of what information is needed by whom. Because the MLE system is integrated with a web-based knowledge management (KM) system, stories and feedback can be flagged for communications purposes, planning, and inquiry.

Stakeholders have recognized the limitations of the Logical Framework Analysis (LFA) that was used for previous evaluations, and saw that evaluations could serve a bigger purpose than reporting back to donors on the number of volunteers placed. Partners saw that this could be used to examine areas and outcomes that were not included in their standard LFA model, while respecting sensitive or confidential business data. The new system has enabled CESO to use its resources effectively and, in collaboration with partners, identify key information that is most relevant to demonstrating the achievement of program goals.

Key Challenges Encountered

Siloes and staff buy-in. When CESO began their review they recognized that there was a significant silo effect between evaluations and other aspects of the program. As a result many staff and other stakeholders were indifferent to M&E, which they saw only as an added demand by donors, rather than a useful tool for reflecting on activities capable of informing their work and identifying efficiencies. Staff recognized the previous system was not yielding the results it could and this stimulated buy-in, a number of strategies were used to communicate and engage with staff to show what a new framework might provide.

“I think that communities of practice have been a great opportunity for CESO to benefit from the knowledge of other organizations but also share the work we are doing.”

Sherri Watson, CESO Vice President, Partnerships and Program Development

The *Bridging Gaps* CoP showed the Evaluations team the value of engaging stakeholders, within and outside the organization, in the design of M&E processes. Feedback was taken seriously by the Evaluations team to make the processes more useful and useable by staff, VAs, and partners. The CESO team also saw

how partners could be engaged, face-to-face, to generate higher quality and quantity of information and encourage buy-in. By gradually breaking down internal siloes and engaging with staff at all levels, including senior management, the Evaluations team was able to encourage widespread buy-in and support of the new system. While not all staff and partners are fully comfortable with the new framework, the Evaluations Department and senior management regularly engage with and support them in monitoring and evaluation.

“There was a perfect storm of circumstances that came together. We had a lot of changes as an organization and we really benefitted from an opportunity to bring in the system that we have now.”

Sheri Watson, CESO Vice President,
Partnerships and Program
Development

Integration of National and International Programs. CESO has moved towards one framework for national and international program evaluations, but this move was initially hindered by an exclusive focus on international programs. When national programs staff and stakeholders became involved they shared experiences, challenges and ideas that were critical to the overall process. Ideally, both programs would have been involved in the process from the beginning to aid in this harmonization. While it may have been impractical for CESO to revisit M&E to the same extent simultaneously across the organization, they now recognize earlier integration, even if limited, would have been useful. However, with a full review of the international programs’ MLE system now complete, the Evaluations team is able to apply the lessons from this review to CESO’s national programming.

Dearth of Resources. Like many Canadian CSOs, CESO has experienced challenges as a result of a general lack of resources in the development sector as well by a more specific lack of resources needed to prioritize organizational learning. CCIC’s news release on Canada’s 2013 budget notes that “general funding for civil society organizations (CSOs) and specific funding for the volunteer sending CSOs, has been put on hold for the past two years, and new projects approved for specific purposes have been significantly delayed.” As a result, CESO has had to seek out creative ways of addressing professional development and training opportunities for their staff, as well as ensuring that any organizational learning initiatives are efficient and cost-effective. Strategies which they have used include careful planning for brick-by-brick development of a new evaluations framework as well as maximizing the use of skills and expertise available through their volunteer roster. When training volunteers and staff on their new web-based KM system, they have used such training as an opportunity to better understand how information can be passed along and what are the organization’s particular information needs.

Factors of Success

The *Bridging Gaps* community of practice contributed greatly to CESO being able to revisit and change their evaluation systems. The organization’s review and internal restructuring was an ideal time to re-examine the larger role evaluations could play in informing programming, planning and strategic directions. CESO’s evaluations standards became cross-cutting and helped break silos down in other areas of the organization as well, in part due to the participatory process inspired by the *Bridging Gaps Community of Practice*. It was serendipitous that *Bridging Gaps* was ongoing at the time of CESO’s review of MLE, as working with other CSOs provided significant opportunities to share CESO’s evaluations

experiences in a peer group and inspiration to move beyond Results Based Management. CESO's membership in the CoP exposed them to participatory SAS2 tools, along with the expertise of the facilitators in applying these tools, and had CESO realize that the process of developing their system was just as important as the final result. This encouraged organizational buy-in and integration with other aspects of the organization while validating internal thinking.

Bridging Gaps also provided tools for drawing out experiential or tacit knowledge, while simultaneously documenting and analyzing it in a participatory manner. Not all partners are comfortable with typical documentation or evaluation styles, and these new approaches have strengthened CESO's relationship with its partners, and their ability to draw out important institutional knowledge that may have previously not been shared. The conversion of this information into partner-level results has also enabled information to be accessed in real time for communications, feedback, and planning purposes to ensure that evaluations are shared with stakeholders in a timely manner and used to inform planning.

Organizational review and strategic thinking. CESO's organization-wide review of their strategic plan introduced structural changes across the organization, supported the development of their unique partnership model, and built closer links between its Evaluations Department and program staff. The new evaluation framework came about and was supported through these changes, including a new web-based knowledge management system that the Evaluations Department could use to facilitate and standardize evaluations. At a higher level, CESO invested in more regular face-to-face meetings rather than electronic communications to increase awareness of results and strategy among staff and other stakeholders. This new organizational culture stresses the importance of sharing information through, for example, regular in-office sessions (where volunteers and staff will come to the organization to report on their assignments/travel), which helps staff connect to the projects they support. Their latest annual reports feature "lessons learned" to highlight where CESO has adapted their strategy to address particular challenges.

The office culture has been tracked by employee and in-house volunteer surveys to determine how individuals feel about their work, the direction of the organization, and the strategy that they are using to get there. There has been a notable improvement in these results over the previous two years, and this has validated the new communications structure, insofar as employees feel that knowledge-sharing and their relationship to the work has improved.

Linking staff and volunteers. The evaluation and strategic review was supported by the expertise of CESO's roster of volunteers, 36 of whom work in the Toronto and Montreal offices to support various core functions of the organization. These in-house volunteers assisted with the strategic review and actively took part in the process. Moreover, other volunteers were asked to take part in the preparation for a new MLE system, and their detailed feedback pointed to further areas for improvement. This deeper engagement with volunteers continues and is being refined to address CESO's own professional development needs, client & partner needs, and to offer a more fulfilling experience to its volunteers.

CESO for Tomorrow

For CESO, their revised monitoring and evaluation system has greatly contributed to their organizational development. There is widespread recognition that the organization should strive for uniform standards of reporting to ensure that the collective impact of organizational projects and programs can be understood within the broader development context. Senior management has engaged staff in ongoing M&E training, and reinforces opportunities for learning, using the M&E framework in all projects, and applying consistent standards to all aspects of CESO's work. These include recruitment, coordination, Volunteer Advisor services, and project reporting.

"In the past we looked at what was required by the funder, and how they wanted information presented and collected. Now in the last year we've introduced reports focusing on particular issues or themes we feel are important. We're moving beyond looking at an individual funder and what they want and instead setting our own standards as an organization for knowledge."

- Sheri Watson, CESO Vice President of Partnerships and Program Development

Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology Pioneers Knowledge Base to Confront Knowledge Management challenges

8

The Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (CAWST) based in Calgary, Alberta, provides technical training, consulting and expertise on innovation in water and sanitation solutions for the poor in developing countries. The organization began with a simple device for water treatment, the biosand filter, with the mission of providing education and training to build local capacity. CAWST was founded in 2001, but the organization's water, sanitation and hygiene programs have expanded significantly beginning in 2008, through the launch of their Water Expertise and Training (WET) Centre program through which they have partnered with local organizations to build training and consulting expertise. All of CAWST's training and education materials are open-content and available at no cost through their website.

The CAWST network includes governments, UN-agencies, NGOs, and social entrepreneurs throughout the developing world. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) gauge the relative impact of CAWST's programming in the communities and organizations with which they work. Their strategy is devoted to learning with and from their partners to engage, educate, and empower local communities, while remaining an innovative and pioneering organization within the field of water and sanitation. As CAWST grew they found it increasingly challenging to effectively and efficiently document knowledge and lessons from their own work and the work of their partners. To address this CAWST developed the Biosand Filter Knowledge Base, a web-based knowledge management (KM) tool, to manage their historical data, their reports, and their interaction with clients and partners. This initiative was undertaken to enable the organization to share

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all facts and information referenced in this case study are based on interviews CAWST staff by in Ottawa, Canada, 12 June 2013; and, in Calgary, Alberta, 23 July 2013.

CAWST at a glance:

Vision: a world where people have the opportunity to succeed because their basic water and sanitation needs have been met.

Mission: to provide technical training and consulting, and to act as a centre of expertise in water and sanitation for the poor in developing countries.

CAWST's fundamental beliefs:

1. As a fundamental necessity for life, all persons have the right to a safe and secure supply of water.
2. Recognizing the universal right to clean water, all members of the global community have a responsibility to create or support institutions, economic systems, and social structures that can fulfill this necessity.
3. Developing the capacity of local populations to meet their own needs is the only sustainable solution for provision of basic services.
4. Non-profit agencies provide leadership in improving the living conditions of the poor and development of civil society worldwide.

knowledge and increase its impact while addressing the challenges of geographical distance and documenting experiential knowledge.

CAWST's learning strategy is an integral part of how the organization understands itself and focusses on achieving their ultimate outcomes. Specific activities are designed to include feedback loops for learning to improve upon how they reach their ultimate goals. To adapt to the challenges and fluctuations facing many organizations in the Canadian development sector, as well as the needs of their clients and partners, CAWST's learning processes take into account change at the team, project, management, and board levels. Specifically, the organization aims to implicate all employees in the processes of improving organizational strategy, knowledge management, and project implementation by creating opportunities for collaboration and feedback.

We are trying to build an organization that is continually learning and can achieve the impact we have set forth as a non-profit in terms of our mission and vision of improving access to water and sanitation in developing countries. We're not redoing what already exists, so we continually adapt our services and products so that we know what works and what doesn't so that we can, ultimately, reach that end goal of safe drinking water."

- Olivier Mills, Director of Communication

There are three key elements that inform CAWST's overall learning priorities: an organizational mission that prioritizes leading the water and sanitation field, a culture that encourages and supports learning, and an organizational structure that implicates team

members in decision-making to ensure alignment between employees and organizational priorities.

Organizational Strategy

CAWST has made an explicit decision to focus on being a pioneering organization in water and sanitation. This focus on being a leader in the field entails efficiently implementing and testing water and sanitation technologies. The focus on technical expertise is unsurprising, given that the founders of the organization, and many of its board of directors, come from the for-profit energy and financial industries in Alberta. This hybrid non-profit/business model consciously takes a business mindset, but is informed and guided by not-for-profit governance and a commitment to improving lives in developing countries. This conscious decision gives them the drive to look to innovation in the business sector to stay on edge, while remaining committed to working with the poor. Olivier Mills notes that "it's not for profit and that's where the shift is, and that's why we subsidize our services because the bottom line is more people with safe water and sanitation, not increased profits." CAWST's long-term plan is to remain relatively small in its staff size because their organizational focus on being a pioneer in their field requires the capacity to absorb feedback and shift plans according to internal and external constraints, opportunities, and other circumstances. Their strategy is designed to continue pioneering by remaining small, while increasing their wider impact by more effectively improving their technologies, training, and reach.

The organizational culture at CAWST, informed by their pioneering mission, is entrepreneurial and encourages innovation and flexibility in activities and processes. Importantly, employees are able to admit failures when projects do not proceed as anticipated, which means failures can be understood, can inform overall organizational processes and structure, and will not be. According to Oliver Mills, this is a critical element of CAWST culture because “it’s a very safe environment in which to fail. I think that’s good for the organization on the learning. People come up with their own ways of improving their learning and processes and bring it forward. That’s part of the success of the organization.” This culture is also supported by formal activities that encourage learning, such as two annual two-week learning exchanges, where staff are able to share the latest research and findings as well as their experiences in the field and with projects. This face-to-face opportunity to physically connect is highly valued, despite its cost, because it builds on and captures knowledge. These exchanges are also open to partners who happen to be in Calgary at the time, and CAWST has started sharing these more widely via online meetings and training.

The final critical element that supports CAWST’s learning processes is a flat organizational structure. This allows the organization to best take advantage of new opportunities and the needs of partners and clients. This one-step team structure implicates team members in decision-making processes and helps ensure alignment between employees and organizational priorities. As part of this structure, each employee has an individual weekly meeting with their director to assess current priorities, new opportunities, and time available. This frequent feedback harmonizes needs at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Employees are able to suggest the best use of their time, and which projects they will be able to contribute to across the organization, not just within their team. There are no “siloes” activities as no single project at CAWST is run by one department/unit. Thus lessons are quickly transmitted throughout the organization in an iterative and face-to-face manner through coordinators and links between teams. Within each project, short- and long-term feedback loops and systems are designed to validate plans and to move forward as an organization.

Key Challenges

The challenge of CAWST’s approach is that it requires frequent communication, at times lengthy iteration, and an ability to translate tacit experience into explicit and transferable knowledge. While effective and critical to CAWST’s success, the face-to-face physical learning approach was stretched as CAWST grew in number of employees and geographic dispersion. For CAWST, communication in their planning phase is critical and the organization is moving towards a “trust the process approach” to ensure that communication and information exchange remains efficient.

To continue to expand the organization’s impact while remaining innovative CAWST staff recognized the need to formalize decision-making processes, feedback loops, communication, and knowledge capture.

“The full definition of Information technology is not just coding but knowledge management. I think it’s the knowledge management that did great things for this organization, not the development of the software – but the consulting parts, where you look into the processes and see what needs to be changed or integrated into something manageable by a computer.”

- Zoran Gilgorov, ICT Coordinator,
CAWST

As CAWST grew the organization found it difficult to manage historical data concerning clients and to transfer knowledge and skills between HQ staff, trainers, and field staff. They found that newly recruited staff had difficulty absorbing the knowledge and skills required to effectively support partners and clients in biosand filter technologies. By developing a new knowledge management system they saw an opportunity to fast-track individuals to become experts in biosand technologies and to improve their service delivery. Furthermore, as the team became larger and more geographically dispersed, new means were needed to ensure knowledge transfer of lessons from HQ to the field, and vice-versa.

Development of a KM System

Critically, CAWST staff recognized that knowledge management solutions for learning do not just capture raw data. They also need to support the formal and informal learning pathways that enable experience and tacit knowledge to be used and more widely disseminated. For CAWST, by allowing bi-directional communication and advice that is recorded for future use, “the innovation is that it’s not just the factual information from this research paper or the factual knowledge from publications but advice that is tailored to the question that is asked. So tacit to explicit.” This knowledge can then be used by other CAWST employees as well as by biosand filter users to improve water, sanitation, and hygiene solutions.

Therefore, CAWST invested in creating a KM system that would serve both its operational and learning needs. In order to build on and enhance face-to-face iterative learning, CAWST has developed and piloted a knowledge management system called the Biosand Knowledge Base.

An external motivation for a new knowledge management system was to make CAWST’s interaction with clients more effective and to improve users’ access to knowledge to increase the impact of water, sanitation, and hygiene programs. They saw the opportunity to improve their knowledge management while enabling users to interact more closely not only with CAWST staff but also with one another, so that successes, challenges, and effective strategies could be consolidated in one platform and shared more widely. By developing such an interactive platform clients might have access to context-sensitive information and historical knowledge that would help them implement water and sanitation solutions.

An important priority for CAWST was that any new tool could be harmonized with current practices and would be modifiable to suit future needs and growth. This priority meant that a commercial system was not the best choice, as these can be more difficult to integrate into current practices and to modify in the future. As a result, CAWST chose to leverage in-house

“We did it in-house because we’re learning – many organizations might outsource [this kind of work]. We knew the burden but we realized that to learn from it, it needed to happen in-house because there is so much iteration in making a useful IT product.”

- Olivier Mills, Director of Communications, CAWST

resources and personnel to ensure it would meet their own needs and learning priorities. CAWST decided not to start from scratch but to find some middle ground between purchasing a third-party software system and coding their own from the ground up. The basic platform which they chose is Drupal, an open-source content management system. The choice of open-source software was not an easy one for CAWST,

but the benefits of having control over its design, implementation, and modification outweighed any advantages that commercial products offered. Olivier Mills took the project on personally due to the costs associated with consultancies and because his knowledge of the organization meant “there was no time wasted in translating and explaining how we work. We’re not getting someone who has to figure us out... and they (outside consultants) never fully figure you out.” This fast-tracked the system and allowed it to be developed at minimal cost while keeping the organization’s priorities central.

The system that was developed, the Biosand Filter Knowledge Base, is a content management system designed to address information management, knowledge management, and communications needs. The goal of the system as a whole is to easily replicate and distribute technical, business, and “soft” knowledge within CAWST itself, as well as to clients and partners. The system has several key elements, including:

- Knowledge management: allows both employees and clients to access technical knowledge, reports, and case studies/evaluation. Users are able to upload their own reports and evaluations if they choose to share their knowledge, and;
- A bi-directional communications system, whereby CAWST staff can upload responses to frequently asked question and respond to inquiries from users in real time. Users can interact with one another through a forum to share.

Key Factors of Success

Thus far, the Biosand Knowledge Base platform is seen as a success. It has a private information management component that captures factual information such as client and partner history – what services and training have been provided. This centralized data has enabled client hand-overs to occur seamlessly. A second component allows users or people interested in biosand filters to view and

Knowledge Base at a Glance

What? An interactive knowledge base for users of biosand filters.

Why? To enable successful implementation of biosand filters.

How? By sharing technical expertise and experiential knowledge.

6 Sections:

- [Designs and Technical Updates](#) - to share designs, modifications and resources related to biosand filter production and installation.
- [Implementation](#) - for users researching evaluations and knowledge on the ‘softer’ side of implementation.
- [Questions & Answers](#) - a bi-directional communications tool between CAWST technical advisors and users.
- [Research Papers](#) – a database of academic papers on biosand filters with additional CAWST analyses.
- [Projects](#) – a platform for users (organizations and individuals) of biosand filters to share their projects, evaluations, and case studies.
- [Forum](#) – Google Groups maintained by CAWST to provide updates, generate feedback and discussion around scale-up options for the production of biosand filters.

search a database. This contains historical knowledge of why the Filter has evolved the way it has. It also allows users to upload case studies based on a template that is very practical and focussed. The various facets of the Knowledge Base enable bi-directional communication between CAWST staff and users and specific or common questions are made publically available in a searchable “Question & Answer” section. Finally, an online Forum using Google Groups allows users to interact with one another and CAWST staff on ‘hard’ technical knowledge and ‘softer’ components such as demand, training, household follow-up and monitoring/evaluation.

While the Knowledge Base has allowed CAWST to better train internal staff, it is the impact on users and clients that has been most profound. It allows clients to profile and highlight what they do and to interact with one another to share their own knowledge and experience. While CAWST is not a networking organization, it has taken on a networking role by facilitating conversations through the Knowledge Base: “this enables us to try new and different ways of delivering the filter by distributing video and recordings from training sessions. We have a system that allows us to do this and are now trialing new ways of knowledge distribution” (Zoran Gilgorov, ICT Coordinator). A benefit of Knowledge Base is that it allows CAWST to easily create an offline version that can be used by those with intermittent or no access to the Internet.

While CAWST has not yet undertaken a full evaluation of the Knowledge Base system, the results from their Annual Client Survey are highly positive. Half of the survey respondents have used or contributed to it. Their website analytics show that they have reached hundreds of organizations and individuals, far beyond what had been expected. While not yet ready to do a full evaluation, they plan to determine how clients are using the new system and how it can be improved to better engage and support biosand filter users. Additionally, now that the Biosand Filter Knowledge Base has been piloted, CAWST will be able to create additional Knowledge Bases to complement the other technologies and activities which they support.

CAWST’s Knowledge Base development has worked well in large part due to the organization’s prioritization of learning as a central aspect of their activities. All employees and activities are implicated in building an organization that can have a greater impact on water and sanitation in the developing world. There was an internal recognition by several employees that full knowledge management – not just data capture -- could improve the organization’s effectiveness, and CAWST management was open to their suggestion that they invest in such a system. Moreover, those employees with the knowledge and skills to develop such a system were able to re-orient their time to investigate possibilities and make the project a reality. By leveraging internal knowledge of information and communications technologies CAWST developed the system brick by brick to take into account their own ways of working. This ensured the system is targeted to current needs, but is capable of being adapted and scaled to future priorities. This targeted approach took into account the specific knowledge management needs, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach. As designed, the Biosand Filter Knowledge Base enables CAWST to effectively leverage tacit/experiential knowledge and translate it into explicit knowledge that can be used by others. While the challenges of documenting knowledge, including time constraints, cannot possibly be fully eliminated, they can be reduced by developing tools that are user-friendly and appropriate.

Genre en Pratique: a Community of Practice Supported by the Associations québécoise des Organismes de Coopération internationale (AQOCI – Quebec council for international cooperation) ⁹

Equality between men and women can be a difficult issue to examine; even more so when embedding it into projects and programs. Rather than work in isolation, a group of Canadian international cooperation organizations developed an informal working group that soon evolved into a formalized community of practice to share knowledge between organizations and maximize their use of limited resources and time. Their learning strategy confronts these challenges and reflects the diverse membership of the group. Their collective inter-organizational work shows the impacts that innovative learning strategies can have on staff and institutions.

Genre en Pratique – Gender in Practice is a community of practice based in Montreal, Quebec, that creates a space for CSO practitioners to talk about strategies, difficulties, opportunities, successes, and struggles of embedding gender equality into organizations and programs. Informally created in 2010 and formalized in 2011, the Community of Practice (CoP) facilitates mutual learning on gender equality to reinforce innovation and best practices within their members' projects, programs, and organizations.

The motivation for the CoP came from the "Conference on women's rights and gender equality in Canadian cooperation" organized by the CQFD. There, participants reflected on the challenges of embedding gender equality into their own programs and organizations. They recognized that working together on the institutionalization of gender equality might be more effective in confronting this complex issue, which touches on organizations' own cultures, partner organizations, projects in the field, and staff attitudes. It became apparent that while the conference was successful, there was a need to address a sense of isolation and to strengthen how organizations work on gender equality by breaking barriers between practitioners through mutual exchange.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all facts and information referenced in this case study are based on participation in two community of practice activities and subsequent interviews, 15-16 January 2013 and 18 July 2013 with CoP members in Montreal, Canada; and, "3^e Rapport d'étape au CRDI : 19 mois du 1^{er} novembre 2011 au 31 mai 2013." See references for full citation.

Genre en Pratique

Objective: to mobilize knowledge and consolidate a dynamic environment for learning, exchange, training, and innovation between member organizations to facilitate and reinforce capacity on the subject of equality between men and women, at the project and organizational level.

Who: 11 Canadian international development organizations, most of whom are also members of AQOCI's *Comité québécois Femmes et Développement (CQFD)*. In 2013, the organizations within this community of practice are: *CECI, Crossroads international, CUSO, Development and Peace, Equitas, Fondation Paul Gérin-Lajoie, L'Oeuvre Léger, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam-Québec, SACO-CESO, SUCO*.

Goals:

1. To develop and consolidate a dynamic of sharing knowledge, tools, and practices on gender equality between CSOs, Southern partners, and researchers.
2. To enable the systematization, the construction, and diffusion of knowledge, tools, and strategies as well as good practices on gender equality.
3. To reinforce the capacity of CoP members and their Southern partners on gender equality by using new tools and collective reflection gender mainstreaming into organizations.
4. To establish peer support in the process of organizational change, called "mutual assistance."
5. To promote innovation and experimentation of new practices on gender equality.

AQOCI was approached by these practitioners to coordinate an informal working group. While AQOCI was unable to dedicate additional financial resources to the topic, it was able to provide some staff time to aid in coordination and identify a graduate student intern to support the members' activities. Over the following year the group met informally to share their experiences and thoughts on institutionalizing gender equality.

While the informal working group was a success in that it created a space in which practitioners could think about shared challenges and how to overcome them, the members saw an opportunity to deepen their work on gender by examining, sharing, and creating tools and strategies that advance equality between men and women. However, they encountered two key challenges in moving forward with their work:

- a) at the institutional level, a sense of competition and lack of trust that impeded inter-organizational knowledge-sharing and learning; and,
- b) a dearth of resources and capacity for reflection and learning within the development sector.

The first challenge arises when organizations are focussed on continuing their own work in a competitive environment for funding. Organizations can be wary of collaborative knowledge-sharing because they may want to protect their own niches. They may also be reluctant to openly address challenges which they have faced for fear of damaging their reputations and jeopardizing further access to funding. Staff, too, can be wary of sharing too much information that is not approved by senior management for external audiences.

The second challenge, closely related to the first, is that funding for NGOs tends to focus on outputs and work in the field. With strict project lifecycles and a constant pressure to generate results, it can be difficult to prioritize reflection. As such there is limited funding for activities explicitly designed for organizations to learn from and improve their work. Learning and improvement then happen at the margins rather than being an explicit priority. This challenge occurs both at the organizational and staff levels. Staff can be overwhelmed by their own workload, which impedes time for reflection on work processes and activities, while hindering their ability to share information with their counterparts in other organizations.

In order to address these two challenges the working group developed a formal strategy to ensure clear organizational commitment for inter-organizational knowledge-sharing and to maximize their use of limited resources and time. They proposed an environment in which staff representatives, with formal rules and responsibility could work collectively to reflect, plan, and co-create knowledge on gender. This learning could then be returned to the organizations and their partners. The members spoke with their organizations to ensure that there was a clear commitment to collaboration on complex and potentially sensitive issues. Additionally, the organizations committed to enabling their staff to devote time to reflecting on addressing inequality between men and women.

To garner additional resources, the members wrote a proposal for funding that formalized roles and responsibilities, and committed them to creating formal outputs and reports that could be widely

disseminated. By collaboratively developing and working on the project, the CoP would be able to leverage their collective expertise and experience to access the limited funding available for learning in the developing sector.

Ensuring Organizational Commitment: to formally address these challenges the members wrote a proposal for AQOCI and funding agencies to create a sub-group of the CQFD that would be called *Genre en Pratique*. Each went to their senior management and requested a letter of support for the project and proposal that committed the organizations to providing financial contributions and staff time. This demonstrated institutional buy-in and ownership, as well as some assurance that learning could be brought back into the organization itself. It also lessened the sense of institutional competition and lack of trust, because participants' organizations approved of their talking about mutual challenges and difficulties. One member shared that "they [the organizations] have signed on, have financially committed to it, and you feel like you have that backing and that permission... I think we probably could have gotten that in an informal setting but then it would be less linked to the organization."¹⁰ While members knew one another previously and trusted one another on a personal level, organizational support meant that they could now create a private space where few topics were off limits.

Leveraging Limited Resources and Capacity: to make the best use of their limited time and resources, the members chose an action plan that would have them meet to share their expertise, as well as create documents and tools of use beyond the CoP. Roles and responsibilities were formalized with written rules and procedures to foster a shared understanding of the CoP. A coordinating committee, made up of a small group whose members changed on a rotating basis, was proposed to steer the CoP. The coordinating committee would consider issues of interest and members' needs, then present the wider group with options for activities and workshops. In this iterative manner the coordinating committee could then formulate a more detailed plan. Members decided that the coordinating committee would be the primary authors of outputs, including technical manuals and tools, reports, constructive feedback, along with other logistical issues. They requested that AQOCI provide a part-time lead coordinator to animate the group's learning and assist the coordinating committee in its duties.

The members' determination to produce the proposal convinced AQOCI to assume coordinating responsibilities of the CoP, should it receive funding. The proposal was successful and in 2011 the CoP became a formal group supported by AQOCI's gender equality coordinator. This person, an expert in gender, would assume responsibilities for the CQFD and the CoP. Funding has increased the confidence of the members, attracted institutional support, allowed opportunities for training by outside experts, and provided incentives to create written outputs, including publically shared technical documents. While the group would likely have continued informally, funding was critical to allowing the group to have a deeper impact within the CoP and a wider impact with other organizations outside of it.

¹⁰ To respect the collective nature of the CoP and to emphasize the organizational nature of the project, all in text quotations have been depersonalized, at the request of the members to emphasize the collective nature of their work.

“This community of practice is a wonderful place where we can share expertise, we can learn from others, we can create opportunities when we come back to our organizations to increase the time we’re talking about gender, talk about what’s happening in other organizations and talk about what’s working and not working. For all these reasons we are part of the community.”

*Odette McCarthy, Program Manager, Centre for Study and International Cooperation,
CECI*

Learning Strategy

The objectives of the *Genre en Pratique* community are to share and co-create knowledge and skills, to build capacity, to provide peer support, and to innovate and experiment with new practices on gender equality. While there was a clear benefit to the individual members, the group focuses not only on the transfer of knowledge and lessons between members themselves but from the members to their own organizations and partners. The learning strategy is three-pronged, as it targets the members’ own knowledge through discussion and training which can be applied to the projects they work on, as well as their own institutions and their institution’s partners. Finally, tools and outputs are made publically available through AQOCI’s website. In addition to informal feedback, evaluations and self-assessments are used regularly by the coordinator to adjust activities and strategies to address member needs and ensure that learning is occurring at the individual, institutional, and partner levels.

The diverse membership requires a learning strategy that can balance different institutional needs. Effective and participatory coordination has been instrumental in fostering a sense of ownership over the CoP and has helped balance the needs of less and more experienced organizations. These are at various stages of institutionalizing gender within their policies, action plans, and programming. The more advanced organizations are able to support the others while working on more complex issues, such as evaluating gender within programming and exploring how theories of masculinity relate to gender equality. While this has been a challenge, the CoP has been able to build the capacity of less advanced members and provide a stimulating environment for advanced practitioners. There remain challenges in accounting for the different needs of the members, but the CoP has managed to promote sharing, learning, and knowledge creation on topics of mutual interest.

“It is really important to work closely with the NGOs and have them as a sort of watchdog to make sure I am doing the work they want to be done, because ultimately this is for them. I am a project manager, but it is their project.”

- Julie Martineau, Program
Manager for Gender
Equality, AQOCI

To ensure that the core group remains engaged and active, the CoP carefully considers requests for membership as they risk losing more experienced practitioners if the group returns to topics previously

examined. However, they are cognizant of the danger of becoming too exclusive, given their goals of generating greater participation and having a wider impact. To address this they are exploring strategies that will maintain a sense of intimacy, while opening up some activities to wider groups.

The coordinator takes an active role in the strategy, and is careful to involve the members at each stage of planning and coordination. She also makes sure the CoP's action plan does not go off track from what was enshrined in the original proposal submitted to IDRC, which is the main funder of this innovative project. Finally, she gives technical support on gender equality contents and helps the members keep a critical analysis of where the CoP's work is heading to and on how their organisations can move forward towards gender equality institutionalizing. In these responsibilities, the coordinator is supported by volunteers from the group.

Key Challenges

Team and Institutional Learning: at the individual level CoP activities have encouraged and contributed greatly to effective learning. However at the team and organizational levels learning is more difficult to assess. This is in part due to the nature of activities that remove staff from their organization as this prevents non-member staff from interacting face-to-face with other organizational representatives. While members of the CoP are able to easily and quickly distribute documents, they or their colleagues may lack the time to discuss how the documents or lessons could impact their own organizations. This also depends on the size of an organization – smaller organizations are able to more easily communicate in a face-to-face manner the lessons and impacts of the CoP, while in larger organizations this may be more difficult. In team meetings, there may not be time to share lessons. Finally, when documents are distributed it is difficult to verify any uptake by other members of a team or organization.

Since an evaluation in June of 2013, the CoP has revised its strategy to create small working groups to concentrate on shared institutional needs. This focus on NGOs' institutional needs makes it easier to foster organizational change because each CoP member elaborates strategies and actions to leverage change within their own organisation. By forming smaller working groups on institutional needs Members are divided into thematic groups based on common priorities selected by their own organizations, and support one another in carrying these initiatives out. This is a new point of departure as concrete initiatives are taking place within organizations with the support of the CoP. This should address a key priority of the CoP: to transfer the learning from the community to strengthen the capacity and political will of member organizations to promote gender equality. This will be reinforced by meetings at one another's organizations, which will increase opportunities for face-to-face involvement of their co-workers on this subject. Already, several CoP members have created gender committees in their organization to involve more colleagues in this organizational change. One member shared that "we will work on the elaboration and application of a gender policy. This is something that our organization needs and we haven't had the opportunity to work on, so this is a great opportunity for us."

Impact on partners and language barriers: the impact of the learning has been felt at the field level when CoP members work on their own projects and programs, and when others in their teams approach them

as gender experts in their own right. However, the language of documents has hindered the uptake of the technical manuals and training kits, as not all are available in English and Spanish. While members have translated parts of documents for their partners, it is evident that unilingual documents do not have the same impact as others that have been translated. The biggest challenges with translation are choosing which tools to translate and disseminate, then revising and improving them prior to recruiting a translator (which can be difficult in and of itself, when quality and consistency must be ensured). In year three of the CoP, the members will focus on translating tools for wider dissemination and impact.

Connecting with Academia: CSOs can find it challenging to connect with academics due to their different research rhythms, priorities, and networks. The CoP originally had an intern with coordinating responsibilities who did use her work to complete her studies, but since then the CoP has struggled to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners. They recognize it is important to be in contact with ongoing research and that researchers may find their own work interesting or relevant, but how to most effectively identify, connect, and partner with researchers remains a question. This gap between research and action is one for which there are few simple answers. The members are considering ways of reaching out to researchers as the CoP enters its third year.

Critical Factors of Success

Membership: the determination of the membership. They recognized an area on which they could have an impact and decided to create an informal working group, then sought out the funding to formalize their activities. This determination was critical early on and it is still very much evident today. The momentum which they created is now being returned to their own organizations and partners, as they help others move forward on gender equality. The common concerns and origins of the group have helped to ensure a stable membership that has not lost sight of its original goals to engage with one another. Indeed, most individuals part of this community of practice knew each other and had developed working relationships in the previous years, through their participation in AQOCI's *Comité québécois Femmes et Développement – Quebec's committee on women and development*. The members have cultivated a sense of trust that allows them to reveal vulnerabilities and struggles, so much so that very few topics are off limits. This has allowed learning and reflection deepen more than otherwise possible. This sense of trust deepened in the initial year of a still informal CoP which individuals built without institutional support.

“To arrive at a level of trust sufficiently high enough to put our concerns on the table was the most important factor, and is a remarkable achievement. The rest is planning and systematization.”

Linda Gagnon, Program
Manager, Agri-
Environmental Approach,
SUCO

The CoP draws on the skills and expertise of the membership to explore the issues of gender equality. With varying levels of experience, the practitioners have all contributed to exploring how to overcome the challenges of furthering the institutionalization of gender equality within their own organizations, their partners, and the projects and programs which they support. This diversity of experience and skillsets

has helped link gender theory to practice, which has helped ensure that CoP activities are relevant to the it's members' work.

Outside Expertise: sharing internal experiences is critical to how the group functions. However, members have found that external expertise can be effectively used to support learning. While the group itself has rich experience, when “we need to go even further in our reflection we can call on external support to provide expertise” (CoP member). For example, an academic with experience in theories of masculinity was invited to present on theories of masculinity and how these might apply to incorporating gender equality into activities. Daniel Buckles and Jacques Chevalier, both of Carleton University, were invited to lead a session on participatory action research, planning and evaluation. With advise from these two facilitators, CoP members created project profiles and used participatory tools to collectively evaluate and share projects within their organizations. This also served as a preamble to the workshop of the next day, which brought together *Genre en Pratique* and a community of practice on strengthening planning and evaluation for learning.¹² In the words of one member, this allowed Genre en Pratique to “gain from the experiences of the monitoring and evaluation CoP, and think about how we could integrate this into our own practices. The subject became how to monitor and evaluate gender in programs and projects, and this fusion between the two subjects was very useful to us.”

In the experience of the CoP members, outside expertise prompts innovative ways of thinking of one's own experiences and exposes the group to pertinent academic research or new practices which can then be debated, put into context, and then brought back to the member organizations quickly and easily. Critically, outside expertise is useful only when the members were able to “quickly go back into our reality. The link between taking the outside material and applying it is not necessarily an easy leap” (CoP Member). For practitioners, such as the members of the CoP, it is important that outside experts are not merely theoreticians, but also have experience with challenges encountered in the field. This field experience helps them to animate conversation and show the pertinence of theory to practice.

Effective coordination: the CoP has experienced challenges in balancing the needs of its membership and in triangulating their impact on organization. An effective coordination has been crucial for moving forward while remaining focussed on its goals. The coordinator was able to dedicate time to logistical concerns, such as finances, organizing activities and workshops, finding venues for the meetings, planning agendas, and ensuring that technical papers are prepared. This coordination relieves the members of this administrative burden and allows them to focus their energies on their work. Critically, the coordination is participative and iterative to ensure that members are involved in decision-making processes that increase their sense of ownership. It allows them flexibility to respond to opportunities and challenges as they arise. In addition, the coordinator is supported by the coordinating committee for strategic decision-making, as well as writing technical manuals and reports to donors. This careful consideration of effective

¹² *Bridging Gaps*, a community of 12 CCSOs coordinated by Canada World Youth. This CoP explores ways to efficiently meet financial accountability requirements from funders while strengthening planning and evaluation for learning.

and participatory coordination enabled the group to move forward in their planning, while accounting for changing circumstances and requirements of the membership.

Motivation to create documentation: when the CoP began, the members decided it was of critical importance to not only talk about their experiences as a group, but to document these and disseminate their lessons, tools, and manuals with others. This motivation to share more widely has provided legitimacy in the eyes of their institutions and others because tangible outputs can be leveraged for greater impact on gender equality. This has also helped the members look beyond their individual learning and towards how their own institutions and partners can learn or use that which was produced. For example, the training manual *Promoting Gender Equality: From Theory to Practice* has helped member organizations and their Southern partners develop gender policies and institutionalize gender equity. Shared on the AQOCI website, it has been used by other Canadian organizations to develop their own policies. These concrete outputs have also enabled CoP members to present at AQOCI's annual general meetings and arrange opportunities to engage with senior management in other organizations about gender.

"Each CSO has a different experience from the others which can benefit the others. We complement one another like the links in a chain as we work together. This is the spirit of our community of practice."

Ghizlaine Ben Zerrouk, Reporting and research coordinator, Canada World Youth

Organizational Impacts

The more advanced member CCSOs in the CoP are now perfecting their gender strategies and exploring new areas, such as theories of masculinity, and participative monitoring and evaluation. Less advanced members are reinforcing gender sensibility and capacities within their own organizations, while integrating the work of the CoP into their own activities.

At the institutional level:

- *Nine members began internal discussions with their teams to re-evaluate and re-invigorate organizational approaches to the institutionalization of gender equality.*
- *Four have created gender committees to involve more of their co-workers in this subject.*
- *Four have developed action plans to translate gender policies into concrete actions.*

At the program level:

- *Two members have further integrated gender equality and lessons from the CoP into their most recent funding proposals.*
- *3 Further integrated gender equality into their monitoring and evaluation.*
- *Five are planning a toolkit for monitoring, evaluating and learning from gender sensitive programs.*

Members have supported their partners in:

- *Integrating gender sensitive questions into their projects, increased exchange and conversation on gender, and have used CoP-developed tools with their partners.*

Documentation and Outputs

- *Promoting Gender Equality: From Theory to Practice: a training kit for international organizations that updates and complements the 2004 Gender and Development Kit.*
- *Five technical manuals:*
 - *Gender Policies –the main components of a gender policy, the obstacles in implementation, lessons, and helpful tools and references.*
 - *Gender Sensitive Evaluations– methodologies, obstacles, lessons, positive impacts, and key resources.*
 - *Theories of Change – key lessons on developing reflective practices and methodologies through a case study of gender equity in Oxfam Canada's Partnership for Cross-Sectoral Engagement.*
 - *Communities of Practice – a guide for creating and supporting communities of practice that includes theory, different types, benefits, and a self-evaluation for members of CoPs.*
 - *Accompanying Partners in Mainstreaming Gender – key findings, challenges, considerations for creating enabling conditions and an analysis of goals and activities of Canadian CSOs.*

These documents, and others, are available at: <http://www.aqoci.qc.ca/spip.php?article331>

Chapter 4: Organizational Learning Initiatives in Canadian Civil Society Organizations: A Comparative Analysis

Organizational learning and improvement is a broad topic. However, the approaches to learning initiatives examined in this paper – a knowledge management strategy, a new monitoring, evaluation and learning framework, organizational re-focussing, and a community of practice – share common strategic elements. While some NGOs are dealing with growth, others with downsizing, and others are aiming to become more effective, there are key ingredients to the learning strategies CCSOs are implementing or improving. No initiative – whether it was conceptual, content-based, applied, or process-oriented – was conducted in isolation from other aspects of the organization. Conceptual understandings of why and organization does what it does inform what data is collected which in turn influences the systems used to collect data, face-to-face or through ICT systems. Captured information is then turned into knowledge by processes and structures within the organization, at which point it can then return to the conceptual level and inform visions, missions, strategy, and decisions. This virtuous circle does not always occur, and is certainly not the only manner in which knowledge flows within organizations. Exogenous and endogenous factors effect at which levels of the organization decisions are made and how they inform strategic thinking and knowledge capture.

All four cases were analyzed to distill commonalities between these strategies and organizations to identify considerations and elements required for effective learning strategies, planning and processes at the headquarters level that support fieldwork and directions. The following analysis of the cases illustrates that CCSOs choose strategies that secure senior management and staff support; that balance internal needs with external demands; that design purposeful data collection systems; that apply knowledge to decision-making; and, that maximize the use of internal and network capacity. A final item, inter-organizational learning, is also analyzed in the context of these four case studies.

4.1 Securing Senior Management and Staff Support

To push learning itself and particular initiatives from the margins towards the centre, the organizations studied had to secure senior management and staff support. While two cases of learning directions, those of SCI and CESO, are top-down and the other two (CAWST and *Genre en Pratique*) are bottom up, they all strove to implicate multiple levels of the organizations to accomplish their goals. This is not to say that major lessons cannot occur at the individual level, but rather that projects that implicate many team members can access institutional expertise, break down siloes, and reach a critical mass that supports change.

The case studies imply that learning directions initiated by upper-management must seek conceptual changes with staff to secure ownership and positive attitudes towards changed work processes and procedures. CESO's management and evaluation teams worked hard to proceed with a participatory process to ensure that staff recognized the benefits of a revised evaluation strategy. This work is ongoing, and management continues to strive to implicate employees by engaging with staff in

ongoing M&E training and reinforcing opportunities for learning. SCI's small size aided in this process; staff already worked closely with one another and recognized the need to rapidly change their strategy and business model. Behavioural changes such as the reallocation of resources can be quickly initiated by management, and the conceptual changes that follow can be measured by staff surveys and usage of revised tools and procedures.

The opposite challenge is apparent in those cases initiated by staff. CAWST and CESO had to secure senior management commitment to foster behavioural changes. CAWST staff had to ensure the allocation of resources towards a revised ICT system. Members of *Genre en Pratique* had to secure documented commitments to inter-organizational knowledge-sharing, including institutional uptake and human capital to attend meetings and create documentation. In both cases staff documented organizational needs, the purpose of the action, and the benefits to the organizations. They have also had to work towards behavioural changes among their fellow staff and the organizations themselves. These have been measured with annual client and staff surveys (CAWST) and participatory tools to measure institutional uptake (*Genre en Pratique*).

4.2 Identifying Endogenous and Exogenous Factors

Canadian civil society organizations choose learning strategies that can balance internal and external knowledge needs. This allows them to maximize scarce resources for learning by harmonizing donor accountability requirements with the processes that support their learning and knowledge needs and those of their partners. Learning activities can be used to communicate with the public to show organizational directions and strategies and demonstrate that funding is spent efficiently. While there are many exogenous and endogenous factors that affect CCSOs' work, the cases reveal that four are critical importance when CCSOs in the development sector target organizational learning: internal needs; organizational culture; partner needs; and, donor requirements.

4.2.1 Identifying Internal Needs. Each organization sought to improve its learning strategy differently based on their mission and partners. The four cases show how learning strategies are not one-size-fits-all, but require a targeted identification of areas that could be strengthened to inform organizational directions and/or field work in the future. How these areas can be improved requires an assessment of constraints (financial, human, political, funder requirements, volume of data, knowledge silos) and opportunities (funder flexibility, internal capacity, support from partners, size). All studied organizations use a variety of methods to identify internal needs through feedback loops, which include informal pathways, face-to-face talks, and annual climate surveys of staff. Larger organizations tend to require more formal pathways to ensure that staff have input on work plans, processes, and strategies.

CAWST recognized that as their organization grew, face-to-face physical learning approaches were being stretched to their limit by finances and geography. They chose to bolster their face-to-face iterative learning with a virtual platform that could help them make tacit and experiential knowledge explicit. CESO initiated an organization-wide review that led to a new strategic and operational plan that focussed efforts on six pillars, one of which was program planning, delivery, evaluation, and reflection.

This focus on M&E was designed to help CAWST document, manage, and use large volumes of documentation.

The identification of internal needs and the opportunity to address these can also come from external sources. The *Genre en Pratique* community of practice evolved from an AQOCI-led conference at which delegates realized they could support gender-equality within their organizations and with their partners by collaborating with one another. Facing an increasingly competitive and challenging funding environment, Sustainable Cities International has moved to broaden their revenue base by refocusing their business model. While there is certainly a difference between internal and external motivations for learning, planning for both is an element of agile and adaptive organizations which can react quickly to emerging trends.

4.2.2 Cultures of Learning. CCSOs seek to create a culture that provides incentives and opportunities for learning and improving the way they work and plan. However, output-driven workloads and project lifecycles can impede this. Further, there can be a powerful emotional incentive to consciously or unconsciously suppress talk of ‘failure’ or learning from errors, as these can be associated with failing to make a positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries. Organizational norms can impede or encourage this, and the cases show that organizations are trying to reframe how they think about failure and put it into a more positive light to inform projects, processes, and plans. To do so requires a culture supported by dedicated and passionate staff who think critically about the work they do, senior management (and board) commitment to organizational learning initiatives, processes that optimize the flow and development of knowledge, and tools for assessing organizational culture.

4.1.2 Identifying Partner Needs. Equally important to CCSOs is the successful identification of partners’ capacity to provide and use reporting, and partners’ knowledge needs. This can be a challenge for CCSOs because their beneficiaries/partners may have priorities that do not include providing detailed reports, may be reticent/unable to provide sensitive or confidential information, and have multiple donors to which they are reporting. Further, for non-profits and charities Canada Revenue Agency regulations must be followed and require partners to harmonize with CCSOs. Some partners may be familiar and comfortable with these regulations, but others require training in RBM/LFA and other reporting requirements. Additionally, partners may have multiple sources of funding, all of which may have different reporting requirements. Engaging with them in a conversation about what they already report, how they report it, and what guidelines they have in place may help them identify synergies in regards to reporting.

To address these challenges, CESO and CAWST have engaged their partners in participatory and iterative approaches to ensure that reporting can be harmonized as best as possible and that key indicators are useful for organizational learning and planning. This allows them to avoid being totally dictated to by donor demands. CAWST, for example, asks first what they themselves need and what will help them improve performance. They then examine what funders and donors want and attempt to integrate these so that additional reporting is kept to a minimum. If particular donors’ requirements are too burdensome or are not useful to themselves or their partners, they may simply turn down funding.

CESO has moved towards one standard of RBM+ reporting across its organization that accounts for financial reporting requirements while satisfying learning requirements. Close and participatory engagement with partners and beneficiaries helped them identify their needs and examine areas and outcomes not included in their previous evaluation approach while respecting their sensitive or confidential data. The new system has enabled CESO to use its resources effectively and, in collaboration with partners, identify information which relevant to demonstrating the achievement of program goals.

As *Genre en Pratique* began its second year, the members recognized that they were not having the institutional impacts that they had anticipated. They have since revised their strategy to create smaller working groups to concentrate on shared institutional needs and ensure that concrete initiatives take place within the organizations supported by the CoP.

4.1.3 Understanding Donor Requirements. The literature review, survey, and subsequent interviews found that understanding and reporting according to donor requirements can be challenging for CCSOs. LFA and RBM accountability systems are not necessarily designed to help organizations learn from their work, nor to provide useful and timely feedback to partners. Reporting on political activity and finances for not-for-profit purposes is an additional requirement that CCSOs must often fulfill.

The cases of CAWST and CESO show that M&E systems can be designed to help account for these requirements and render them less burdensome. Such frameworks typically aim to measure key indicators across the organization's work that suit the LFA and RBM requirements of government donors, but also provide measurements that can inform the organization's own knowledge needs. They do so by measuring and planning for process-related outcomes, such as relationship and trust building, that are essential to longer-term outcomes and unanticipated results.

This was confirmed by interviews with organizations that did not make up a case study. These organizations indicated that their strategies for designing useful and minimally burdensome RBM frameworks were: (a) to have few and easily measured indicators; (b) to communicate the utility of these frameworks to partners and build their reporting capacity; and (c) to be flexible in measuring indicators. Additional factors that aided organizations in reporting were to have dedicated evaluation staff, experience with LFA and RBM systems, and reporting to the same donor agency staff.

A final note on donor requirements is that understanding the political priorities and climate is essential. Being able to report on results, such as economic development and linking Canada's economy with the rest of the world can be important, but these are development outcomes which are not necessarily typically reported on.

4.2 Designing Purposeful Data Collection Systems

CCSOs working in international development, and many other organizations, have difficulty in documenting, managing and applying knowledge. This is even more pronounced for tacit or experiential knowledge which often requires lengthy socialization and iterative, face-to-face conversations. CCSOs are moving towards knowledge management systems that can draw these lessons out: they increasingly

recognize that capturing raw data is not enough. This data must also be used and applied to contribute to formal and informal learning pathways that inform organizational directions, planning, and field work.

Strategies for this include both informal conversation and formal virtual and face-to-face knowledge-sharing activities. Depending on their needs, as well as those of their beneficiaries/partners, CCSOs may prioritize formalized knowledge capture and analysis or may choose to share experiential knowledge through more conversational aids, such as structured webinars. This is a function of the time required to document knowledge written reports that may not justify the effort, but also reflects a thirst in the Canadian development landscape for more networking and face-to-face conversation.

The cases show that indiscriminate data capture does not inform organizational learning, as it causes information overload. Data capture must be purposive and targeted towards the needs of an organization, as well as donors and partners, if it is to be effective, manageable, and applicable. CCSOs choose data capture strategies that enable their access to pertinent information by asking the correct questions, engaging in conversations with partners and beneficiaries, and ensuring that documented knowledge is shared with relevant stakeholders (which enables better and more enthusiastic documentation in the future). Strategies that identify knowledge pertinent to organizational directions and field work are essential to manage knowledge and apply lessons.

CCSOs use a number of means to document knowledge and ensure its pertinence. CESO's strategy involved a participatory process that involved multiple levels of stakeholders to create a system that reduced redundancy, increased efficiency and accuracy, and can feed into planning and inquiry. CAWST chose key performance indicators that could be captured with minimal burden while providing accurate and timely information, and an annual client survey to better understand clients' needs and how they use CAWST's knowledge. Feedback is immediately given to the service delivery team so that results and impacts can feed into the next annual cycle.

4.3 Applying information to decision-making processes

To help captured knowledge inform decision-making the organizations studied examined their internal formal and informal knowledge pathways. By doing so they were able to apply information to project- and organizational-level strategies and transform information into useful knowledge. The *Genre en Pratique* CoP dedicated time to clarifying roles and responsibilities, and formed a coordinating committee that would balance member needs and interests. Similarly, SCI created small working groups of staff and board members to draft a new business model. These smaller groups worked closely together to ensure that institutional knowledge would inform the organizations renewed strategic direction.

CAWST integrated aspects of their knowledge management into an ICT system. This formalized data capture and provided a central repository for knowledge and innovations. CESO's MLE system allows staff to flag cases and stories for communications, planning, and inquiry so they are able to inform future directions. This also put an emphasis on transferring feedback to stakeholders in a timely manner.

As these organizations moved forward they built short- and long-term feedback loops into their projects and programs to receive regular updates on how activities were reinforcing their ultimate objectives. These processes reinforced and validated plans, but also resulted in the opportunity to introduce course corrections and recognize why deficiencies occurred. The organizations did not look at these deficiencies as failures, but as opportunities to learn and move forward to ensure they would not repeat them. Incremental initiatives allow them the time to better understand how these will contribute to or constrain their learning, while allowing them better control over financial, human, and time constraints.

4.4 Maximizing the use of internal and network capacity

Some organizations have the in-house capacity to proceed with their plans in isolation. CAWST had the expertise and resources to develop a full knowledge-management system themselves, but had to re-organize staff roles to allow an employee the time to direct the development of their KM platform to avoid the high costs and inefficiencies of consultants.

This situation tends to be the exception rather than the rule. Most learning initiatives benefit from outside expertise. CCSOs can use their internal and network capacity to minimize constraints and their use of resources. Not all CCSOs have the budgets for external expertise, nor do they necessarily need or require it when engaging in learning initiatives. Thus, these learning initiatives used wider networks to minimize the use of costly, and potentially inefficient, external consultants. While CESO has dedicated Evaluations staff (which many CCSOs cannot afford), they were part of a community of practice that greatly accelerated their project by providing opportunities for inter-organizational learning. SCI had the support of member organizations and their board of directors. *Genre en Pratique* is the clearest example of how organizations come together to maximize their network capacity, and demonstrates the benefits associated with inter-organizational learning and knowledge-sharing.

Other interviews confirmed that regional councils are critical in providing venues for face-to-face knowledge-sharing. These can directly connect organizations on thematic or sectoral issues (such as CCIC's working groups) but also indirectly stimulate conversations and build relationships.

4.5 Inter-organizational knowledge-sharing

The case studies and further interviews also helped determine the extent of sharing with other Canadian organizations working in the development sector. All organizations engage in inter-organizational knowledge-sharing, but this is primarily with their partners in the developing world. Within Canada, knowledge-sharing typically happens through virtual networks, newsletters, and websites. There is some demand-driven knowledge-sharing when organizations contact one another on sectoral themes. While these are necessary, nothing can replace strong dialogue that comes with presentations and talking about results. This encourages rich debate and deeper learning because people are reflecting, thinking, and

coming to a common ground in a manner that cannot be achieved through reading a written report or a newsletter.

All the organizations studied or contacted as part of follow-up interviews to the survey indicated that there is little funding available for face-to-face dialogues, which results in few opportunities to connect. Further, council activities often occur in major cities, leaving organizations that are more geographically dispersed with few options to come together. Knowledge-sharing thus remains within the narrower networks that NGOs themselves have cultivated, typically along historical ties or sectoral links. There may be room for provincial councils to convene systematic and more frequent knowledge-sharing activities and replace the networks that government funders used to support. Many organizations noted that provincial councils are well placed to support organizations with distinct Canadian activities, but less well placed to support ones that are exclusively, or largely, internationally focussed. BCCIC's model of four sub-regional networks, convened around universities, have been very useful when encouraging membership to engage with one another, academics, and the public, as not all members can attend meetings due to the travel required to visit Vancouver. Depending on the continued success of this model, it could be potentially duplicated elsewhere. BCCIC, and several other provincial councils, have also convened learning circles to develop capacity surrounding the Istanbul Principles. This allows the face-to-face learning, and case studies of work of member organizations.

Chapter 5: Key findings, recommendations, and conclusion

The following chapter outlines key findings and recommendations from the study, drawing from the literature review, two surveys, and case analyses. The study explored how CCSOs learn from their activities, the means by which lessons are documented and shared, and how these lessons inform projects, programs, and organizational strategies.

Key Findings

5.1.1 What are Canadian CSOs recent experiences with learning initiatives?

Most recent CCSO learning initiatives have been prompted by reactions to the unpredictability of public funding for development. While this makes prioritizing learning difficult, it also pushes organizations to re-examine what they are doing and rigorously document the impacts their work has. It seems that CCSOs had previously been complacent with learning initiatives as their government funding was more predictable. This removed incentives for learning, working together, and sharing knowledge. Now that government funding is less consistent, organizations must show the value of their projects and programs, and work together to share resources on important issues.

However, these pressing exogenous factors have resulted in few endogenous learning initiatives. A lack of funding has pushed learning to the margins of CCSO activities. As a result, organizations concentrate their learning along existing processes and systems (such as evaluation or knowledge management) or sectors. Furthermore, beyond the two IDRC-supported Communities of Practice noted in the case studies, there seem to be few activities for innovative and concentrated inter-organizational learning.

Particular areas that CCSOs are learning about are the implementation of Istanbul Principles (supported by CCIC and the regional councils), the development of key performance indicators to minimize the burden of monitoring and evaluation, the diversification of funding, and working with the private sectors. On some of these issues, there is inter-organizational learning, but this is often predicated on personal knowledge of others, or active membership in regional councils. For other issues, such as working with the private sector, CCSOs are working in isolation.

5.1.2 What do and how do organizations learn from these exercises?]

CCSOs are interested in understanding how other organizations work, the challenges they face, and how some may have overcome these. Interviews indicated that staff glean the richest information from face-to-face conversations. Though these lessons are often undocumented, they inform projects and programs because staff are able to directly apply them to their work. When such lessons are documented they can

more easily feed back into projects, programs, and strategies because they provide a written record for other colleagues unable to attend. This requires purposeful documentation that relates to key areas of interest to the organization.

To learn from their projects CCSOs use a variety of means including RBM frameworks, travel reports, participatory action research, outcome mapping, and reports or documents from partners. These are often used in conjunction with one another, not in isolation, to gain a holistic understanding of the projects they are supporting. Smaller CSOs may be required to use LFA systems, but may lack the capacity to actively learn from these. To balance this, they use outcome mapping and participatory research to better understand the impacts they are having, and what methods or activities have helped them reach their objectives. Larger organizations, which may have dedicated evaluations staff, often find LFA to be sufficient for their own learning requirements, though this is often used in conjunction with travel reports and documents from partners.

Regional, national, and international councils or networks can play a significant role in convening and supporting inter-organizational learning activities. These include working groups on regional or sectoral issues and the Istanbul Principles, as well as other research- and -policy related topics. Council activities can encourage member organizations to share their successes and lessons from field research and interventions, so that organizations do not duplicate previous work and are able to apply new ways of addressing their goals of development and social change.

From these activities organizations learn about the Canadian development landscape, including the challenges faced by other organizations, innovative activities or projects, and emerging trends.

5.1.3 How do they apply these lessons to their directions and operations?

CCSOs apply lessons to their directions and operations in a number of ways. First, by documenting them they provide a means by which knowledge can inform programs and organizational strategies. Suitable organization-wide processes ensure that lessons are drawn from across the organization. Data thus transformed into knowledge enables organizations to understand their development outcomes and to target future activities.

To inform directions and operations, it is crucial to build long-term feedback loops into their projects and programs for regular updates on how activities are supporting corporate and program level objectives. These processes reinforce and validate plans, but also provide the opportunity to introduce course corrections and identify deficiencies. To push learning from the margins towards the centre, organizations must secure senior management and staff support to ensure that lessons are documented and that processes are followed. Implicating multiple levels of the organizations through iterative or participatory processes can help organizations access institutional expertise to ensure effective operations and inform strategic directions.

5.1.4 What challenges and opportunities do they face?

CCSOs face significant challenges in learning and improvement. However, there are also opportunities for internal learning and inter-organizational learning. Challenges include a lack of resources, a pressure to lower administrative costs, an adrenaline culture that prioritizes reporting rather than reflection, and LFA systems that do not prioritize learning. Many organizations have noted they do not want to be in a situation where official government funding makes up a majority of their budgets.

A lack of resources was mentioned by nearly every organization as a serious constraint. This was not just for learning, but for their work in general. CCIC and Aidwatch Canada's analysis of *Canada Budget 2013* notes that "general funding for civil society organizations (CSOs) and specific funding for the volunteer sending CSOs, has been put on hold for the past two years, and new projects approved for specific purposes have been significantly delayed." While this is a serious challenge, CCSOs can work together to demonstrate their value and impact on government priorities. It is important for civil society to learn how to communicate effectively with policy makers when they may share divergent opinions or priorities on development issues. Somewhat related is an increasing pressure for CCSOs to lower their administrative budgets so that more funding is directed towards projects in the field. However, this moves learning towards the margins and prevents it from being a central focus. Moreover, uncertainty about what constitutes administration can challenge organizations. Supporting the administrative budgets of partners may constitute important capacity building, but cannot necessarily be documented as such. Learning and a budget to do so are part and parcel of an effective organization, but this is often unfunded or comes out of administration.

CSOs often have an adrenaline culture which is promoted by logical framework approaches and RBM-systems that are used for planning and reporting. These can create a constant pressure to generate results where outputs might be seen as the major, or only, measure of success in the field. Within project lifecycles, incentives for reflection and learning can be lost or there may not be time to implement changes. There can also be a fear of repercussions if negative or critical outcomes were to emerge from learning initiatives. These have implications for funding and for credibility and can prevent organizations from sharing openly.

This said, CCSOs are highly interested in and motivated to make LFA and RBM-systems work for their own learning and that of their partners. This is a challenge because it requires liaising with donors and working closely with their staff and partners to develop targeted learning systems. Small organizations may not have dedicated staff that can create organization-wide monitoring and evaluation systems. However, M&E can be a catalyst for learning because it touches on most field work. There is an opportunity for CCSOs to work together on revised MLE systems that can highlight their work and successes. This might continue the work that CCIC as well as the *Bridging Gaps* community of practice have begun, or it might look at revised systems. Looking ahead, it will be important to work with and share the results of any such initiatives with DFATD and other donors.

Other opportunities for CCSOs include continuing to create opportunities to learn together on critical issues to bridge internal gaps in expertise. These might include sharing experiences of working with the private sector, developing codes of conduct for doing so, sharing experiences and challenges of collaboration with academia, developing knowledge management platforms, and strategies for diversifying funding. Regional councils provide an important opportunity and catalyst for such initiatives by bringing CCSOs together on a range of topics.

5.1.5 To what extent do they share these lessons with the wider communities?

The research found that CCSOs tend to share with their counterparts in Canada by uploading documents to their websites, publishing newsletters or organizational updates, face-to-face at conferences/forums. With some they may have close personal or professional relationships. Knowledge-sharing thus remains within the narrower networks that NGOs themselves have cultivated, typically along historical ties or sectoral links.

The CCSOs studied prioritize communicating with their partners in the developing world, but do engage with their Canadian counterparts. However, there is likely room for greater sharing and knowledge of one another's work. Most organizations indicated that there is little funding available for face-to-face dialogues, which results in few opportunities to connect. Further, council activities often occur in major cities, leaving organizations that are not located in major cities with few options to come together.

5.1.6 How do regional councils support these activities?

Some of the CCSOs studied are part of provincial councils, but do not actively participate in council activities. Some cited the fact that regional councils typically support smaller and recently established organizations. Council activities may not closely relate to their particular sectors or challenges; more topical issues could be interesting subjects for discussion. Others noted that CCIC tends to be of more use to larger organizations, which work on policy and have the capacity for staff to participate in working groups. Despite these minor criticisms, regional councils are a crucial venue for development-oriented CSOs to network and collaborate on issues, such as codes of conduct, the Istanbul Principles, and public engagement. The councils also document issues of importance to CSOs and emerging trends while providing training and support to organizations.

In addition to their regular work, the councils each have particular areas of expertise, which they have expanded on through the Inter-Council Network Global Hive Project. This brought together all networks on the following topics:

- How Change Happens (MCIC)
- Global Education (ACGC)

- Integrating Gender Equality into Public Engagement (AQOCI)
- Monitoring and Evaluation (BCCIC)
- Partnerships and Collaboration for Public Engagement (ACIC)
- Public Engagement Policy (OCIC)
- Youth-Based Public Engagement (SCIC)

Unfortunately, it seems that CCSOs do not often share their ongoing learning initiatives with the other councils. There seem to be few incentives to do so, as these are unfunded and may be burdensome. Further, the geographical dispersion of Canadian organizations across many provinces increases the difficulty of organizations within the “development belt” of the Greater Toronto Area to Montreal of reaching out to their counterparts in the rest of the country. There may be the opportunity for organizations to engage with one another through webinars, but this requires greater knowledge of cross-Canada activities and initiatives.

5.2 Recommendations

The findings of this study are pertinent to CCSOs, regional councils, and donor organizations. Several key recommendations, which are not necessarily distinct, can be made for each group. In general, CCSOs have been criticized for ‘boutique organizations.’ They do important and effective work, but they lack the capacity to scale up their work. Learning to work together and have greater impacts is a challenge shared by many smaller CCSOs, and regional councils and donor organizations might be able to incentivize this work.

5.2.1 Recommendations for CCSOs

CCSOs should attempt to bring learning to the centre of their work, rather than leaving it at the margins. This can be difficult due to underfunding and an inability to consistently access official development funding, but should be a priority of organizations that wish to be innovative, effective knowledge creators and brokers. With this said, CCSOs should be realistic about what they aim to achieve with learning initiatives, and target the most crucial aspects of their organizations where inefficiencies and knowledge breakdowns occur. When contemplating organizational improvement, CCSOs must think about what needs to be strengthened – reporting, internal processes, strategy, or field work, etc. They might ask themselves which elements are missing, where are lags occurring, and where are transactional costs highest. Engaging staff when identifying these areas is crucial, and may require re-balancing work priorities. Monitoring and evaluation seem to be a critical nexus of knowledge creation and sharing, and CCSOs could improve their M&E work by ensuring that reporting is limited to the most pertinent outcomes and results. Smaller organizations might engage in capacity building with their in-country partners so that these are able to fulfill most reporting requirements.

Taking time for reflection is critical. Annual retreats or days away from typical work provide the opportunity to reflect on work processes, projects, and emerging issues. These also provide a moment when experiential knowledge can be transferred through socialization, and then systematically recorded for planning purposes. Knowledge can be produced all along, not just at the end of the project lifecycle in project completion reports or evaluations. This can allow organizations to highlight how their approaches succeed, how they have been improved, and may aid in communicating field activities to others.

CCSOs should strive to actively share their knowledge, either through regional councils or their wider networks. They should ask themselves if their knowledge is pertinent, and if it has been shared with others. This allows the opportunity to make connections for future collaboration and knowledge-sharing, which can strengthen their work and that of others. Both the *Genre en Pratique* and *Bridging Gaps* communities of practice began as informal and unfunded working groups of organizations interested in gender and monitoring and evaluation. These provide interesting models for working together informally on timely issues and then seeking out funding once the initial exemplar has proven utile.

5.2.2 Recommendations for regional councils

Regional councils support a diverse membership, and should carefully consider the needs of members and who they aim to support, be they newly founded, established, or large. They should ask themselves if they provide a range of activities that can keep their memberships engaged and actively sharing with one another. For organizations in large provinces, they might follow the example of BCCIC which has convened 4 regional sub-councils at colleges and universities to better support geographically distant members. They might also consider which staff they target – is it program officers or upper-management – as some CCSO staff are not aware of council activities and how these might help their work.

Councils might also want to consider systematically documenting the impact of their networks on professionals, institutions, and overall development outcomes. This was a challenge noted by 56% of councils, and they might come together to better understand how these networks contribute to organizational and collective objectives.

The Inter-Council Network's Global Hive initiative is to be commended, and councils could continue supporting targeted interventions on topical issues. The *Genre en Pratique* community of practice demonstrates how councils can provide expertise and coordination for these activities. CIDA once supported thematic networks that provided opportunity to share and create knowledge. The regional councils may be able to step into this role, depending on their capacity to do so.

5.2.3 Recommendations for donor organizations

The study found that exogenous factors often provide critical motivation for CCSO learning. Donor accountability mechanisms have pushed CCSOs to revise their monitoring and evaluations strategy so that they can report to donors, while also enabling themselves and their partners to learn from the work they do. Donors occupy a position of great power and with this comes a responsibility to ensure that changes actually help CCSOs improve the work they do. They should strive to ensure consistency in staff interactions with CCSOs, to ensure that their demands and requirements do not shift. This is a major complaint of CCSOs and increases their administrative burden significantly.

Donors ought to ensure that there is time for reflection and learning after project lifecycles conclude. This might entail providing funding for CCSOs to meet with partners and other stakeholders to reflect on impacts and on what did and did not work. Donors can also ensure that these lessons are recorded and shared so they can inform future projects and strategies. They might also consider providing greater funding for CCSOs to come together for discrete learning activities, events and conferences. This can also provide an impetus for CCSOs to document and share knowledge with one another. CCSOs yearn to learn from one another, but are stretched for time and resources. Donors might be able to help satisfy this need.

Donor organizations should also attempt to visit regions to share opportunities for funding and their understanding of the Canadian development landscape. This might occur through councils or other venues. Such face-to-face interactions provide rich opportunities to engage with regional councils and development organizations and to share knowledge with one another. However they also provide an opportunity for participating organizations to network.

Finally, donor organizations might want adjust their requirements to the capacity of small organizations. Interviews indicated that small organizations are held to the same reporting and monitoring standards as large organizations. This prevents expansion, growth, and innovation as they are continually stretched by reporting requirements. Donors might consider, in conversation with these organizations, alternate means of holding smaller organizations to high standards.

Conclusion

CCSOs do not simply provide service delivery and project support to their partners in the developing world. They are institutions with corporate objectives and strategies, and are actively working to advance these through organizational learning and improvement. To do so they work with their staff and partners to consolidate and streamline the data which they collect and report on project and development outcomes. Knowledge management and ICT systems help them collect and codify this data so it can inform future projects and strategies. They seek to improve their internal efficiency, processes, and procedures to ensure that they are using their resources effectively. All this informs their strategic choices concerning their visions, missions, and strategies.

These elements of organizational learning can be lost in fast-paced project lifecycles and important field work. Still, it is important for CCSOs to take time to reflect on their work, why they do it, and how they can improve it. Government or individual donors, should support these endeavours rather than consider them to be examples of administrative excess. They are an important element of capacity building that can help CCSOs ensure the work they do has real, lasting impacts in the developing world. There is an opportunity for CCSOs to develop strategies which allow them to share and co-create knowledge, not just about their field work, but also on the processes and systems at headquarters that support such field work.

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